ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL
Available Online: https://assajournal.com
Vol. 05 No. 01. Jan-March 2026.Page#.6086-6097
Print ISSN: 3006-2497 Online ISSN: 3006-2500
Platform & Workflow by: Open Journal Systems
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22041965

Hydro-politics of the Indus: The Six Canal Dispute, Provincial Autonomy, and the Crisis of Federal Water Governance in Pakistan

Huda Naveed Waince
M. Phil. Scholar, Department of Pakistan Studies, Government College University, Faisalabad
hudawaince00912@gmail.com
Dr. Zil-e-Huma Rafique (Corresponding Author)
Assistant Professor, Department of Pakistan Studies, Government College University, Faisalabad
zilehumarafique@gcuf.edu.pk
Rabeea Rizvi
M. Phil. Scholar, Department of Pakistan Studies, Government College University, Faisalabad
rabeearizvi@yahoo.com

Abstract
The six-canal project of Pakistan initiated under the Green Pakistan Initiative of the federal government in 2024-2025 has caused the most severe water dispute between provinces in decades. While Punjab and the federal government consider the construction of the six canals to be important for the increase in agriculture and food security, the Sindh considers it to be violation of the 1991 Water Apportionment Accord. The paper studies the issue of six-canal dispute with reference to the theory of hydro-politics, focusing on how the colonial inheritance, the system of provincial autonomy provided by the 18th Amendment, and institutional disputes between IRSA, CCI, and the courts affect the issue. Using official papers, media coverage, and expert opinions, the paper suggests that the dispute over six canals is not only about the distribution of water resources, but also about other underlying problems, namely the issues of power, authority, and trust within the Pakistani federation.
Keywords: Hydro-politics, Six Canal Dispute, Provincial Autonomy, Federal Water Governance, 1991 Water Apportionment Accord, Indus River, Pakistan.

Introduction

Hydro-politics in Pakistan have their roots much deeper than the creation of Pakistan itself. It started during the colonial period in British India and became the world's largest irrigation network in the Indus Basin. Prior to the British annexation of Punjab in 1849, water management was highly decentralized with a reliance upon inundation canals, wells, and periodic floods. The control of irrigation systems usually lay with local communities or regional lords.

However, British colonial administrators drastically changed the situation and introduced the modern form of irrigation, based on bureaucratic centralization, with goals to, increase agricultural output, generate additional land revenues, resettle military pensioners, gain additional political control over

Punjab Produce export crops, such as cotton and wheat. In order to do so, the British built huge canal networks, barrages and related institutions in the Indus Basin. Though this helped greatly to increase agricultural efficiency, it also led to the uneven development of different regions[1].

Upper Punjab received many irrigation projects through canal colonies, while lower riparian regions relied on natural rivers. This created a precedent for future inter-provincial conflicts between Punjab and Sindh even after independence. The origins of Pakistan's hydro-politics therefore lie in colonial decisions regarding infrastructure investment, administrative boundaries, and institutional governance rather than merely in post-1947 constitutional arrangements.

Research question

1. Who owns the Indus and how does the six-canal dispute reveal the underlying hydro-politics of the Indus, and what does this conflict expose about the tensions between provincial autonomy and federal water governance in Pakistan?

Conceptual Framework

Hydro-politics is defined as the relationship between water and politics. It entails the competition, cooperation, negotiation, and governance by government, institutions, community and states over water resources. Hydro-politics takes place at different levels including local, provincial, national, regional and international levels.

Hydro-politics according to John Anthony Allan is defined as political management of scarce water resources through which competing actors seek to maximize economic, social, and political gains[2]. Likewise, hydro-politics according to Mark Zeitoun and Jeroen Warner is defined as the study of the dynamics of power relationships associated with water allocation, governance and control. The main difference between the two definitions is that while Zeitoun and Warner approach hydro-politics as the management of water disputes, the definition provided by Allan emphasizes that the politics of power usually determines how much water goes to each individual or institution.

Lawyers, students, political parties, and civil societies of Sindh province have continued their protest on account of the canal project initiated by the Punjab government. The controversy that arose in the Senate recently also highlighted the fact that there is a very serious cleavage between the two provinces of Punjab and Sindh regarding the water issue, notwithstanding the efforts of PML (N) to defuse the tension and negotiate with PPP for a smooth solution to the canal controversy. The threat of PPP's withdrawal of support to PML (N) from the former party leader and the strong statement made by the chief minister of Sindh against the Punjab government may not discourage Maryam Nawaz, Punjab's Chief Minister, due to the support of the Army Chief for the project. Pakistan is one of the rarest where disputes between the provinces occur due to water distribution problems. Sindh and Punjab have always been distrustful and in disharmony with each other, and water problems of these provinces have not been solved either through the Indus River System Authority (IRSA) or through the Council of Common Interests (CCI). In recent times, the province of Sindh has accused the province of Punjab for building six

[1]Arun P. Elhance, *Hydro-politics in the Third World: Conflict and Cooperation in International River Basins* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1999), 15–29.

[2]J. A. Allan, *The Middle East Water Question: Hydropolitics and the Global Economy*

canals over the River Sutlej while taking water from the River Indus. On April 15, the Sindh Irrigation Department expressed its resentment over the opening of TP link canal.

Methodology

The analysis of the six-canal issue as an example of hydro-politics in Pakistan is based on the use of qualitative case study methodology. The six-canal issue (2024-2026) is used as the main case in the paper, along with the Chashma-Jhelum and Taunsa-Panjnad link canals, the Greater Thal Canal and Institutional Responses (IRSA, CCI, courts).

Historical Background: Colonial Canal roots of hydro-political conflict

Expansion of Canal Irrigation

After the annexation of Punjab, the British realized the potential of agriculture that could be done in the Indus River basin. They shifted from using inundation canals to perennial canals for irrigation throughout the year. Major canal projects included.

Upper Bari Doab Canal (1859)

The network of channels which were earlier used for irrigation in Punjab was upgraded toUpper Bari Doab Canal (UBDC) after Punjab was annexed by the Britishers in 1849. The upgrade was done by two English engineers, Joseph Henry Dyas and James Crofton, and the canal had its headworks constructed in Madhopur near Pathankot. UBDC was responsible for introducing the idea of perennial irrigation in Punjab, and therefore, the farmers could grow crops all year round without depending only on rainfall.

Sirhind Canal (1882)

The Sirhind Canal drew its waters from the Sutlej River at Ropar Headworks in the Rupnagar district and distributed itself into three branches Abohar, Bathinda, and Patiala to irrigate the dry Malwa zone. It is one of the earliest and largest irrigation schemes in the Indusriver system, and its commissioning took place in 1882 CE. Contrary to UBDC, it arose partially out of cooperation with some of the princely states like Patiala, indicating the combined funding by state and princely powers that characterized the later Punjab canal projects.

Lower Chenab Canal (1892)

It was drawn from the Khanki Headworks of Chenab, and the canal was used for irrigation purposes in Rechna Doab and later became the foundation of the Chenab Colony, which was not only the biggest but also the most important of all the canal colonies. The Chenab Colony, which was the biggest canal colony, consisted of 809,500 hectares (2 million acres) of land and had the largest irrigation network in India.

Lower Jhelum Canal (1901)

Following the example of the Rasul Head Works, which began in 1854 from the Jhelum, this canal was another similar project of perennial water supply to feed a new colony called “Jhelum Colony” in the Chaj Doab. The Lower Chenab from Khanki on Chenab in 1892 and the Lower Jhelum from Rasul on Jhelum in 1901 were examples of the same pattern. Colonization and land settlement was carried out from about 1902 to 1906.

Upper Jhelum Canal (1915)

A component of the "Triple Canal Project," the canal was constructed between Mangla on the Jhelum River and the Chenab River at Khanki; designed by Sir John Benton. The canal project began in 1913 and was finished in 1916, when the canal was put into full use. The canal was used for inter-river transfer

and not for any new land colonization scheme. It was meant to move excess water from the Jhelum River to the Chenab and then the Ravi River[3].

Upper Chenab Canal (1917)

The second component of the Triple Canals project was the link between the Marala Head Works of the Chenab to the Ravi upstream of Balloki. This plan was approved in 1905 and completed in 1917. The three canals included were the Upper Jhelum, Upper Chenab, and the Lower Bari Doab Canal. Alongside the Upper Jhelum and newly constructed Lower Bari Doab Canal, it helped in reclamation of the Bari Doab Ganji Bar area through the same concept of inter doab water transfer

Emergence of Inter-Provincial Water Conflicts

The origin of the present conflicts between Punjab and Sindh dates back to the colonial era.With the increasing construction of canals in the upstream region, Sindh became more worried about lower levels of river flows downstream.Major issues arose as.[4]

Sukkur Barrage conflicts

The answer for the infrastructure problem in the province of Sindh itself came in the form of the Sukkur Barrage initially suggested by engineer C.A. Fife in 1868, approved in 1923, and constructed in 1932, originally named Lloyd Barrage after the Governor of Bombay. Work on the construction of this massive structure began from July 1, 1923 and the structure became functional on January 13, 1932. Instead of resolving the issue, the approval made things worse as Punjab complained that the "duties" (formulas of allocation of water) approved for the construction of the barrage in Sukkur were excessively favorable to Sindh, whereas Bombay/Sindh argued that Punjab already had an excessive proportion of water of the Indus System for perennial irrigation, while Sindh, which was a part of Bombay Presidency at that time, had not started a single one.

Lloyd Barrage talks

The discussions on the Lloyd/Sukkur Barrage allocation went back and forth in the 1920s through a correspondence between the Punjab and Bombay governments, assisted by the Government of India, which in 1923 stated that they were unwilling to revisit the allocation matter once they had made their decision in favor of Sindh.The Government of India clearly stated that they were not ready to revisit the issue. In response to this, the Punjab took up its claims on the other side especially the Thal Project proposal first raised in 1924 as an experimental canal in order to stake a claim in writing regarding its allocation from the waters of the Indus.[5]

Sindh and Punjab Water Allocation Disagreements

While both provinces were launching new schemes (the Thal and Haveli canals of Punjab and the extended area of control of the Sukkur canals of Sindh), the colonial government formed different committees in order to give a technical solution to the problem rather than making a political decision: the Anderson Committee report of the 1930s; the Punjab-Bombay technical investigation report of 1934 which approved the construction of the Haveli canal scheme; and the Rao Commission (headed by B.N. Rao) which issued its report in July 1942. The Commission revealed that diversion from the river would

[3] Imran Ali, *The Punjab under Imperialism, 1885–1947* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 104–138.
[4]Imran Ali,4
[5]Imran Ali,5

negatively affect the functioning of inundation canals of Sindh, particularly during low water levels. The commissions merely transferred cusecs between certain canal systems.

Formation of the Anderson Commission (1935)

Sutlej Valley Project completed in 1932 gave rise to the onset of a new set of conflicts in the region. The states of Bahawalpur, Khairpur, Sind, and Punjab began demanding increased allocation of water to their areas. In response, the government established another committee in 1935 to tackle the newly arising conflict and referred to it as "Anderson Committee." This committee consisted of representatives from Punjab, Bahawalpur, Bikaner, Khairpur states and Government of India besides eight experts. In 1937 this committee gave its report. This report recommended increased irrigation facilities for Haveli and Thal projects as well as construction of Chashma Barrage and Thal Canal Project.

Rao Commission (1941)

1941, Sind made complaints to Punjab over Punjab's move to reduce the quantity of water from Haveli and Thal canals. A new commission was appointed by the government to investigate the complaint. This commission is named as Rao Commission that presented its report in 1942. However, this report was not accepted by both the parties. It took around three years of negotiation for the chief engineers of both provinces to settle down the dispute regarding water distribution from the Indus and Punjab Rivers in 1945[6].

Sindh-Punjab Water Agreement (1945)

An agreement was eventually reached in 1945 which, according to the official accounts that came much later, marked the first "equitable" resolution of the conflict.

It was only in 1945 that an equitable settlement was arrived at through the signing of the 'Sindh-Punjab Agreement' about the distribution of the waters of the Indus River and the five rivers of the Punjab state. This agreement continued to be the relevant water-sharing document despite the fact that the governments who signed the agreement undivided Punjab and Sindh, under British rule no longer existed, and the immediate post-partition arrangement between the two provinces of Pakistan stemmed directly from it[7].

Sind-Punjab Water Sharing Conflicts

River water sharing between provinces is Pakistan's biggest water-sharing problem. Punjab is mostly drained by the Indus and its principal tributaries, the Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, and Sutlej. The powerful Indus River drains Sindh and empties into the Arabian Sea after Mithankot. The Kabul River, a significant western tributary of the Indus River, empties into KPK. Another issue is that groundwater is located in the same basin. 50% of the water needed for crops is supplied by about 0.8 million water pumps.4.5 million hectares of land were salinised as a result of ground water development, with the irrigated areas in the Basin being affected by half of this. Irrigated land in the Indus Basin affects an additional 1 million hectares out of a total of 16 million hectares. In downstream Sindh, where 70–80% of the land is saline, the salinity problem is most severe. This turns becomes yet another cause of contention between Sindh and Punjab.

[6]Irum Khalid, and Ishrat Begum, "Hydro Politics in Pakistan: Perceptions and Misperceptions." *South Asian Studies: A Research Journal of South Asian Studies* 28, no. 1 (January–June 2013): 7–23.

[7]Chaudhri Muhammad Ali, "*The Emergence of Pakistan."* New York: Columbia University Press, 1967.

Punjab Sindh Narrative denotes the perception that there has always been an unequal distribution of water in the Indus Basin and that the problem has been viewed by the people of Sindh in particular. According to this narrative, Punjab gets or controls much more water in proportion to its entitlement owing to its strategic upstream location, and thus there is an element of distrust between the two provinces. Complaints about the unequal water distribution have largely been associated with reduced downstream flow, the diversion of canals and the neglect of agricultural and ecological demands in Sindh.

The most compelling aspect of Pakistan's water problems is interprovincial strife for water. The state inherited this conflict as a result of the Sub-Continent's division, which was exacerbated by inadequate water management. The conflict broke out as soon as projects in the Indus River Basin began to be developed in the early 20th century. The main point of contention was the distribution of water between Punjab, Sindh, and the nearby princely kingdoms or those that could be accessed by the planned dams.[8] The people of Sindh have continuously alleged that their entitlement of water according to the Water Apportionment Accord of 1991 has not been honored whereas Punjab has rejected all the claims. Upstream versus downstream is one of the key issues here because Punjab, being an upstream riparian province, enjoys greater control of water movements and Sindh, the downstream riparian province, relies on receiving water downstream for irrigation, domestic purposes and the sustenance of the Indus Delta.[9]

How Chasma Jhelum link canal andTaunsa–Panjnadlink canalfigures as dispute between Punjab and Sindh

The Taunsa–Panjnad (TP) Link Canal is one of the important link canals built in Pakistan in the wake of replacement works after 1960 Indus Waters Treaty. The canal is located at Taunsa Barrage in District Muzaffargarh in Punjab and is built for the purpose of transferring water from the Indus River to the Panjnad River system which then flows to the Sutlej and irrigates southern parts of Punjab and Sindh. The construction of the TP Link Canal took place in the 1960s–1970s along with other link canals including the Chashma–Jhelum (CJ) Link Canal to help redesign the irrigation system in Pakistan following the allocation of the three eastern rivers (Ravi, Sutlej, Beas) to India through the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty. The TP Link Canal has an estimated discharge of 15,000–20,000 cusecs and irrigates Muzaffargarh, Dera Ghazi Khan, and Rahim Yar Khan districts.However, the TP Link Canal has always been a subject of dispute among Punjab and Sindh, especially during times of water shortage. Sindh has always raised objections against Punjab for opening the TP Canal during water shortages in the Kharif season (April-June), stating that it goes against the accord of 1991 and does not benefit the downstream agriculture and ecology. In April 2025, Sindh accused Punjab of opening the TP Link Canal in light of the 62% water shortage in the province, thus affecting the cotton production in Sindh badly along with tail-end irrigation[10]. It is claimed by the Irrigation Department of Sindh as well as political figures that this canal was supposed to be

[8]Zainab Ahmad, *Pakistan's water crisis and Indus River system: revisiting national security*. Journal of political studies, 2019.
[9]LubnaKanwal, "*Sind-Punjab Water Sharing Conflict*," Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences (PJSS) Vol. 34, No. 2 (2014), pp. 501-510
[10]Dawn**,** *Punjab opens CJ link canal after TP channel despite water shortage in Sindh*, (2025, April 28).

operated in case the requirements of Sindh had been met first, but Punjab works on the canal in a perpetual manner even during water shortages.

The Chashma-Jhelum (CJ) Link Canal has been built since the signing of the Indus Water Treaty in 1960 for making up for the losses faced by Pakistan due to the eastern rivers that were distributed to India. This is a canal that transfers the water from the Indus River to the Jhelum-Chenab River System with the main purpose being irrigation of southern Punjab. No operating guidelines have ever been devised for this canal.

In accordance with the 1991 Water Apportionment Accord, each province has a guaranteed share of the river water. Punjab insists that once its share from the Indus has been calculated by IRSA (Indus River System Authority), it is the legal right of Punjab to use that water at its own discretion, which may include using it via the Chashma-Jhelum Link Canal into the tributary area as permitted by Paragraph 14(e) of the Accord.Sindh, on the other hand, strongly rejects this notion. It says that Punjab should not draw water from the Indus River for transfer into the tributary system via the CJ Link Canal when the province itself faces a shortage of water. This, according to Sindh, will decrease the flow of the river in the lower areas resulting in negative impacts on irrigation, drinking purposes, and ecology of the region. So, the Chashma-Jhelum Link Canal has turned into an important dispute regarding inter-provincial water allocation[11].

Six Canal Project

The people in the southern province of Pakistan, known as Sindh, have been protesting and masse against corporate farming and the creation of new canals in the Indus River. The people of Sindh, who face water shortages already, consider these canals to be illegal since these canals would be built for corporate farming in the Punjab province, which is upstream. They were requesting the government of Pakistan to reconsider their decision regarding the creation of the canals. "No new canals will be constructed without mutual understanding and consensus among all provinces," the Pakistani Prime Minister's Office said, reversing its earlier position on the construction of the canals. When the Green Pakistan Initiative was introduced in the Cholistan region in February 2025, the dispute started.The goal is to increase the cultivated area by another 600,000 hectares and at the same time make it possible for machinery to work on the existing agricultural lands of 20 million hectares. Six canals two for each of the provinces of Balochistan, Punjab, and Sindh would be built to irrigate 1.9 million hectares of arid territory. To irrigate the desert of Cholistan, which is situated in Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province, five of these canals will be built from the Indus River and one from the Sutlej River.Sindh, being located down the line, has apprehensions about the construction of these canals. The local people worry that the water diversion for irrigation purposes in Punjab will result in Sindh getting deprived of its due share of water[12].

It was mentioned by the government of Sindh in a summary presented to the Council of Common Interests that according to the water accounts of the Indus River System Authority, Sindh faces an annual shortage of about 13.7 percent of water in the past 25 years, from 1999 to 2023.

[11]Indus River System Authority (IRSA), Water Apportionment Accord 1991 and Link Canal Operations.

[12]Council of Common Interests (CCI),*Decision on Six-Canal Project*. April 28, 2025. Prime Minister's Office, Islamabad.(2025)

There have been situations of drought in Sindh since the time of 1871; that is more than a century before the formation of Pakistan. But, as per Provincial Disaster Management Authority of the government of Sindh, there is an increase in the severity as well as in the frequency of drought in Sindh. The reason for such a condition is the reduced level of rainfall during summer along with the increased temperature caused by the changing climate. Drought situation in Sindh is one of the most severe disasters that the country is facing with "severe to extreme drought like conditions" prevailing in much of the southern part of the country. Presently, there are eight districts of Sindh including Jacobabad, Shikarpur, QamarShahdadKot, Sanghar, Khairpur, Sukkur, Umerkot, and Tharparkar which are facing moderate to severe drought conditions.

Besides the problems that revolve around canals, the people of Sindh are also protesting against the move towards corporate farming. Under the Green Pakistan Initiative, 1.9 million hectares (or 4.8 million acres) of land have been earmarked for corporate farming all over Pakistan. Punjab will get 811,619 acres for this purpose, whereas Sindh will get 52,713 acres, Baluchistan 47,606 acres, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 74,140 acres of land. Currently, 364,000 hectares of land have been allotted for private companies. The farmers of Sindh and Punjab are already protesting against land grabbing for corporate farming. Apart from the question of water sharing, there is also the feasibility of Cholistan Canal that is being questioned. According to Hassan Abbas, an independent consultant on water and environment in Islamabad, the Cholistan Canal is an "unscientific" one. In his view, the canal project needs flat terrain, but this is not available in the Cholistan Desert. In order to address the issue, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif summoned a meeting of the Council of Common Interest for April 28 instead of May 2. It was anticipated that the government would reevaluate and even abandon the canal project.Sindh's have united to oppose the center to safeguard their legitimate rights, and it appears as if they have scored an important victory, at least in terms of putting the canal project on indefinite hold. The repercussions for other provinces of Pakistan, where the conflict between provincial and governmental policies is evident, can be significant[13].

Contestation among Institutions: IRSA, CCI, Provincial Assemblies, and the Judiciary

Besides the contestations that have occurred through political rhetoric and demonstrations, this issue of six canals has been fought out intensely between some of the most important institutions of the federal government as well as the provinces in Pakistan. The Indus River System Authority (IRSA), the Council of Common Interests (CCI), provincial assemblies such as Sindh's Assembly, and the judiciary (the Sindh High Court in particular) have all been instrumental in influencing the course of this controversy.The Indus River System Authority (IRSA) was established under the IRSA Act 1992 to oversee the implementation of the 1991 Water Apportionment Accord as well as ensure water distribution among provinces. The IRSA emerged as a key player by issuing a certificate for the availability of water for the Cholistan Canal in January 2024. However, the certificate served as a pre-requisite for the approval of the project by ECNEC in February 2024. The certificate led to a dispute as Sindh believed that it was issued without their consent in violation of the 1991 Accord that demanded consensus regarding

[13]Dawn, *Punjab opens CJ link canal after TP channel despite water shortage in Sindh*, (2025, April 28)

any new diversion of water. The composition of IRSA was also irregular because there were no members from Sindh[14].

The Council of Common Interest (CCI), formed in accordance with Article 153 of the Constitution of Pakistan as the main body to solve differences between the federation and the provinces, took the most crucial step on April 28, 2025. At the meeting chaired by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and attended by Sindh's Chief Minister, Murad Ali Shah, and others, the Council agreed that no canal would be built on the Indus River system without mutual consent from all the provinces. The Council reverted the approval dated February 7, 2024, by the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC) and the water availability certificate issued by IRSA, thus stopping the construction of the six canals project. This decision was viewed as a milestone for the cause of federalism, as provinces were able to challenge the initiative of the federation and the provinces constitutionally.

The Sindh High Court (SHC) became an important player with its order on April 7, 2025, putting a hold on the issuance by IRSA of the water availability certificate for the Cholistan and Thal Canal Projects. This order is founded on the following grounds: petitioners claimed that the creation of IRSA was in violation of the law since at the time the certificate was being issued, there were no members representing Sindh in the organization; the Court observed that the certificate could be in violation of Sindh's interests as per the accord of 1991, which requires consensus on any new diversion of water; and the SHC recognized the importance of Sindh as the lower riparian province and hence had the right to object to any upstream diversion which threatens Sindh's water share and ecological security[15].

From a comparative perspective of these institutions, a pattern of trust deficiencies is easily observable. The trust between Sindh and its own institutions (Assembly and High Court) and CCI exceeds the trust level that exists with respect to IRSA, which is perceived by Sindh as having a biased attitude towards its problems and thus an illegitimate institution. Effectiveness of IRSA was estimated as low on account of bias accusations and lack of transparency, whereas CCI effectiveness was moderate to high owing to the landmark decision. Sindh Assembly effectiveness was high as legislative expression of autonomy, and the effectiveness of Sindh High Court was moderate to high as constitutional mediation, albeit temporary.

The 18th Amendment and Devolution of Water and Agriculture

The 18th Constitutional Amendment, which was unanimously adopted in the Parliament of Pakistan on 19 April 2010, is considered a milestone in the history of the Constitution of Pakistan. One of the most important clauses of this amendment is the transfer of water and agriculture from the federal Legislative List to the provinces, thus making water and agriculture the main responsibilities of the provinces according to the Constitution. It is worth mentioning that this provision aimed to settle the old complaints of small provinces such as Sindh and Balochistan regarding the federal overreach. However, the issue of the six canals highlighted a disparity between constitutional devolution and actual politics, in the sense that even though water and agriculture had been constitutionally devolved to the provinces, the federal government, alongside Punjab, went ahead with its plans of constructing six canals on the

[14] Dawn. *CCI nixes divisive canals project - for now*, (2025, April 29).

[15] Sindh High Court. *Stay Order on IRSA Water Availability Certificate*. April 7, 2025.

basis of the ECNEC's approval in February 2024 and the IRSA's certification in January 2024 without seeking any specific permission from Sindh[16].

Sindh's Assertion of Provincial Rights

Sindh's objection to the construction of the six-canal system has been raised on the basis of constitutional rights provided by the 18th Amendment as well as the 1991 Water Apportionment Accord. The Sindh Assembly's unanimous resolution dated March 13, 2025, stated that "no canal can be constructed without the consent of Sindh," citing both the 1991 Accord and the 18th Amendment. The point has been reiterated by Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah in his several addresses to the CCI and his public speeches. In March 2025, he told the CCI that the Indus River is the "cornerstone of Sindh's economy and agriculture," and therefore, any such project affecting Sindh's share of water must have the province's consent, considering the 1991 Accord and the 18th Amendment[17]. He warned that the construction of the six-canal system would cause water shortages, affect the economy, and damage the ecosystem of the Indus Delta, especially the tail-end regions facing seawater intrusion.

National Development vs. Provincial Consent

For the federal government, headed by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and his PML-N, there was a tough situation in the six-canals controversy. On the one hand, the government needed to support national agricultural development, food security, and large-scale farming through the Green Pakistan initiative as well, considering the six canals as necessary for converting wasteland into an agriculturally productive area. Speaking in April 2025 before the National Assembly, the federal minister of water resources, Muhammad Mueen Wattoo, asserted that the canals are being sponsored and implemented by the government of Punjab in order to irrigate 4.8 million acres and enhance food production.

On the other hand, the federal government also needed to take into account the necessity of maintaining the principle of provincial autonomy under the 18th Amendment along with preserving the national unity. The deputy prime minister of the country, Ishaq Dar, in April 2025, in his meeting with PPP leadership assured them that "the rightful share of water of Sindh will not be affected in any way" and "we cannot impose decisions on such a sensitive issue."If the federal government had gone ahead with its six-canal project against the will of the Sindh province, then there was the possibility of the government's coalition becoming unstable. In fact, this was one of the major factors which caused the CCI to postpone the project on April 28, 2025[18].

Implications for National Unity and Federal Cohesion

There are many implications associated with the six-canal dispute for national unity and the future of the Pakistan Federation. Water disputes might cause separatism in Sindh and Balochistan, as is evident from mass protests, nationalism, and civil society activism observed during the months of March and April 2025. As Dawn observed at the end of 2025, "2025 was the year of water wars in Pakistan" due to weak water diplomacy, lack of trust among citizens, neglect of infrastructure development, and unpredictable climatic conditions. According to the analysis of Dawn, failure to address disputes would endanger national unity and cohesion of the federation.At the same time, the ruling made by the CCI in

[16]Government of Pakistan,*18th Constitutional Amendment*. National Assembly of Pakistan. (2010).
[17]Sindh Provincial Assembly. *Resolution Against Six-Canal Project*. March 13, 2025.
[18] Dawn*, Pakistan's year of water wars*, (2025, December 31).

April 2025 provided an excellent chance to enhance constitutional federalism. Indeed, Pakistan proved that inter-provincial disputes could be addressed using the federal mechanisms without the use of force[19]. At the same time, it would require political will, transparency, and observance of the 1991 Accord in its full sense.

Policy Recommendations

The following are some of the recommendations for policy changes based on this analysis.

- It is necessary to enhance the regulatory autonomy and transparency of IRSA so as to restore trust in all provinces through provincial representation, data transparency, and enforcement capabilities.
- The CCI needs to be provided with the powers to make binding decisions along with methods of enforcement and accountability in a constitutional framework.
- The Water Apportionment Accord of 1991 must be revised in order to adopt climate-informed water allocation criteria including changes in river flow, glacier melting, and extreme weather conditions.
- Environmental flows beneath Kotri Barrage must be guaranteed and made enforceable to protect the Indus Delta and deal with seawater intrusion, as suggested by the irrigation policy of Sindh and other expert reports.

Conclusion

The six-canal dispute represents a critical juncture in Pakistan's hydro-political and constitutional history, reflecting the strengths and weaknesses of the country's federal system of water management. This analysis has shown that the controversy is not only about the distribution of water resources but also reflects the contradictions of different conceptions of development, provinces' interests, and federalism after the 18th amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan.

The dispute originated from the federal government announced the Green Pakistan Initiative in 2024. The main idea was to build six new canals from the Indus River in order to irrigate the land of 4.8 million acres that belonged to Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. According to the government of Punjab, with the support of the federal government, this project would help to expand agricultural activities and provide food security and sustainable livelihood for people, especially those who live in such poor areas as Cholistan desert. However, Sindh saw the project as the infringement of the 1991 Water Apportionment Accord, violation of their rights of lower riparian state, and exacerbation of water shortages. The following historical background is useful in appreciating why the opposition to the six-canal scheme from the province of Sindh took on an additional constitutional significance in addition to a technical one. Pakistan's problem is how it can evolve the country's existing institutions of federal water governance from being arenas of hydro-politics into venues of cooperative federalism which will be able to reconcile the competing objectives of development, provincial autonomy, ecological sustainability, and national cohesion. The CCI's decision of April 2025 was one step towards such an objective, but more political determination and adherence to the spirit of the 1991 Accord are needed.

[19]Dawn*, Pakistan's year of water wars*, (2025, December 31).

References

2. Al Jazeera. "Why Is Pakistan's New Canal Project Sparking Water Shortage Fears?" *Al Jazeera*, March 27, 2025
3. Allan, J. A. *The Middle East Water Question: Hydropolitics and the Global Economy*
4. Council of Common Interests (CCI). *Decision on Six-Canal Project*. Islamabad: Prime Minister's Office, April 28, 2025
5. CCI Nixes Divisive Canals Project - For Now." *The Express Tribune*, April 29, 2025
6. Elhance, Arun P.*Hydro-politics in the Third World: Conflict and Cooperation in International River Basins*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1999
7. Dawn. "Sindh Assembly Passes Unanimous Resolution Against Six Canals Project." *Dawn*, March 14, 2025
8. Dawn, *Punjab opens CJ link canal after TP channel despite water shortage in Sindh*, 2025, April 28
9. Dawn. *Pakistan year of water wars.* December 31, 2025
10. Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC). *Approval of PC-I for Six Strategic Canals under Green Pakistan Initiative*. Islamabad: Planning Commission, February 7, 2024
11. Government of Pakistan. *Water Apportionment Accord 1991*. Islamabad: Council of Common Interests, 1991
12. Government of Pakistan. *Indus River System Authority Act 1992*. Islamabad: Ministry of Water Resources, 1992
13. Government of Pakistan. *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (18th Amendment)* Act 2010
14. Ali, Imran. *The Punjab under Imperialism, 1885–1947*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988
15. Indus River System Authority (IRSA). *Water Availability Certificate for Cholistan Canal Project. Islamabad: IRSA, January 2024*
16. Indus Canals Project to Greatly Hinder Karachi's Water Supply." *Dawn*, April 6, 2025
17. The Nation. "Sindh Assembly Passes Resolution Against Indus River Canal Projects." *The Nation*, March 13, 2025
18. Zeitoun, Mark, and Jeroen Warner. "Hydro-Hegemony: A Framework for Analysis of Trans-Boundary Water Conflicts." *Water Policy* 1, no. 3