



Mains Practice Question

Q. "Water diplomacy is becoming crucial in South Asian relations." Analyze transboundary water issues involving India and their impact on regional stability. **(250 words)**

28 Jan, 2025 GS Paper 2 International Relations

Approach

- Introduce the answer by briefing how Water diplomacy is becoming crucial in South Asian relations
- Highlight the Transboundary Water Issues Involving India
- Give Impact of Transboundary Water Issues on Regional Stability
- Highlight the Suggestions for Strengthening Water Diplomacy
- Conclude suitably.

Introduction

Water is a vital resource for **survival, economic development, and geopolitical stability**. In South Asia, where rivers such as the **Indus, Ganga, Brahmaputra, and Teesta** traverse international borders, transboundary water management has become a critical issue.

- Shared river systems connect India with its neighbors — **Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and China** — but also create disputes over water sharing, resource utilization, and dam construction.

Body

Transboundary Water Issues Involving India:

- **India-Pakistan: Indus Water Treaty (IWT)**
 - The **Indus Water Treaty (1960)**, brokered by the **World Bank**, governs the sharing of the Indus River system between India and Pakistan.
 - **Challenges:** Pakistan accuses India of violating the treaty by constructing hydropower projects (e.g., **Kishanganga and Ratle projects**) on western rivers.
 - India, on the other hand, contends that **Pakistan obstructs legitimate projects permitted under the treaty.**
- **India-Bangladesh: Ganga and Teesta Rivers**
 - The **Ganga Water Treaty (1996)** governs water sharing between India and Bangladesh during the dry season at Farakka Barrage.
 - **Challenges:** During lean months, **Bangladesh accuses India of releasing insufficient water**, impacting agriculture and livelihoods downstream.
 - Rising concerns over climate change have intensified disputes over reduced water availability.
 - **Teesta River Issue:** Bangladesh demands an equitable share of Teesta waters, but the agreement remains pending due to opposition from **West Bengal, citing its own water needs.**
- **India-China: Brahmaputra River**

- The Brahmaputra, originating in **Tibet (Yarlung Tsangpo)**, flows through India and Bangladesh.
 - **Challenges:** China's construction of large dams, like the **Zangmu Dam**, raises concerns in India **about reduced downstream water flows**, particularly during the lean season.
 - **Lack of a formal water-sharing agreement** and limited data-sharing on river flows increase uncertainty.
- **India-Nepal: Mahakali and Kosi Rivers**
 - **Mahakali Treaty (1996):** Governs water-sharing and the construction of projects like the Tanakpur Barrage.
 - **Challenges:** Nepal accuses India of unilateral construction of dams and **non-implementation of treaty provisions**.
 - Flooding in Nepal due to Indian projects, such as the **Kosi Barrage**, leads to dissatisfaction.

Impact of Transboundary Water Issues on Regional Stability:

- **Geopolitical Tensions and Trust Deficit**
 - Water disputes exacerbate existing political and security issues, **such as the India-Pakistan hostility or the India-China rivalry**.
 - Neighboring countries **view India's water management projects with suspicion**, believing they might be used as tools for coercion, particularly during periods of heightened political tension.
- **Environmental and Livelihood Concerns**
 - Disputes over water sharing often delay collaborative projects, worsening environmental degradation and water scarcity.
 - For example, **delays in the Teesta water-sharing agreement affect millions of farmers in Bangladesh and northeastern India**, creating social and economic instability.
- **Risk of "Hydro-hegemony"**
 - India, as an **upper riparian state for most rivers**, is often accused by neighbors of pursuing "**hydro-hegemony**" through unilateral water infrastructure projects.
 - This fuels regional resentment and could push smaller neighbors like Nepal and Bangladesh towards China for support.
- **Climate Change as a Threat Multiplier**
 - **Melting Himalayan glaciers and erratic monsoons** due to climate change exacerbate water scarcity in South Asia, increasing the frequency of disputes.
 - For example, reduced Brahmaputra flows during lean seasons could **worsen India-China-Bangladesh tensions**.
- **Missed Opportunities for Regional Cooperation**
 - Water disputes hinder South Asia's potential for regional cooperation on energy, irrigation, and disaster management.
 - For instance, the **absence of a comprehensive basin-wide approach for the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna system** prevents joint flood control and sustainable river basin development.

Suggestions for Strengthening Water Diplomacy:

- **Basin-Wide Cooperation Mechanisms**
 - Create multilateral frameworks like the **Mekong River Commission** for collaborative river basin management, ensuring data sharing, joint planning, and equitable water distribution.
- **Strengthen Bilateral Agreements**
 - Expedite pending agreements, such as the **Teesta Accord**, by engaging all stakeholders, including Indian states like West Bengal, in the negotiation process.
- **Data Sharing and Transparency**
 - India and China should **establish robust data-sharing agreements**, particularly for the Brahmaputra, to reduce mistrust during floods or lean seasons.
- **Leverage Regional Platforms**
 - Use platforms like **SAARC** and **BIMSTEC** to initiate discussions on transboundary water

management and promote confidence-building measures.

- **Climate Adaptation Strategies**

- Develop **climate-resilient water-sharing mechanisms** that address the impact of glacier melting, reduced river flows, and rising demand for water in the region.

- **Joint Development Projects**

- Encourage joint development of hydropower and irrigation projects to foster interdependence and shared benefits.
 - For instance, India and Nepal could revive stalled projects like the **Pancheshwar Multipurpose Project** for mutual energy and water security.

Conclusion

Transboundary water issues in South Asia are becoming **increasingly critical for regional stability as rising water demands, climate change, and geopolitical rivalries** exacerbate tensions.

Strengthening bilateral agreements, **fostering trust through data sharing, and adopting a basin-wide approach** will be essential to turn water from a source of conflict into a means of cooperation. By doing so, India and its neighbors can ensure sustainable development and lasting peace in the region.

PDF Reference URL: <https://www.drishtiias.com/mains-practice-question/question-8650/pnt>

