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Institutional Silence and Norm Erosion: The World Bank and the Indus Waters Treaty Crisis

Malik Zada Fazil Rashid[1] **Aasifa Fatama**[2]

[1]Independent Researcher
[2]Independent Researcher

Abstract

The Indus Waters Treaty of 1960, brokered by the World Bank, is routinely cited as a rare case of cooperation that survived armed conflict between its signatories. India's decision of April 23, 2025, to hold the treaty 'in abeyance', and its rejection of the Court of Arbitration's rulings through August 2026, test that reputation. This paper asks what the World Bank's declared role as a 'facilitator' means for the treaty's normative authority. Drawing on the norm life cycle of Finnemore and Sikkink, Wendt's account of inter-subjectivity and Sandholtz's work on norm violation, it argues that the Bank's procedural minimalism contributed to the de-socialization of an internalized norm, although the treaty's machinery had begun to decay before 2025. A realist reading is assessed as a rival explanation: it accounts for the timing of India's decision but not six decades of restraint or the gap between declared abeyance and operational conduct. Statements by the Indian and Pakistani governments and by their commentators are treated in this paper as claims to be reported and analyzed, not as findings. The analysis is confined to the treaty's institutional and normative record, and it takes no position on the factual or political claims advanced by either side.

Keywords: Indus Waters Treaty; World Bank; norm erosion; custodial normativity; hydropolitics; India-Pakistan.

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Corresponding Author: Malik Zada Fazil Rashid | **Email:** ukhrajff@gmail.com

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Introduction

Few international agreements have been credited with as much as the Indus Waters Treaty. Signed at Karachi on September 19, 1960, after nearly a decade of negotiations in which the World Bank acted as mediator, the treaty assigned the three eastern rivers of the basin—the Ravi, Beas and Sutlej—to India and the three western rivers—the Indus, Jhelum and Chenab—to Pakistan, subject to specified Indian uses on the western rivers, and created the Permanent Indus Commission as a standing channel between the two governments (Salman and Uprety 2002). The Bank conceived it as a demonstration that a development institution could convert a contest over a shared resource into an exercise in joint management, the functionalist wager associated with Mitrany (1943). The treaty's record through the wars of 1965 and 1971 and the Kargil conflict of 1999, and through long periods of diplomatic freeze, made it a standard example in the literature on transboundary cooperation (Wolf 2007; Mustafa 2010).

On April 23, 2025, a day after an attack on tourists near Pahalgam, India's Cabinet Committee on Security announced that the treaty would be held 'in abeyance with immediate effect, until Pakistan credibly and irrevocably abjures its support for cross-border terrorism' (Government of India 2025). India links the attack to cross-border terrorism (Government of India 2025); Pakistan rejects the attribution and maintains that the treaty remains 'fully applicable and binding' (Free Press Journal 2026a). The World Bank's president, Ajay Banga, said within weeks that the institution had 'no role to play, beyond that of a facilitator' (Tribune India 2025). On August 31, 2026, a Court of Arbitration administered by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) held, unanimously, that the treaty remains fully in force and that India's abeyance does not legally suspend or terminate it (Free Press Journal 2026b). India rejected the award the same day, describing the Court as 'constituted by the World Bank in patent breach of the terms of the Treaty' (The Week 2026).

The abeyance has already drawn a considerable body of commentary. Legal analyses ask whether a treaty without an exit clause can be suspended on grounds of changed circumstances or counter-terrorism (Garimella 2025). Security-oriented work tracks the securitization of water discourse on both sides (Makhija 2025; Ranjan 2025), and a smaller group of studies uses constructivist or discourse-analytic tools, reading the treaty as a performance-based regime sustained by a 'compliance asymmetry' (Jangra 2026) or comparing academic, political and media framings (Nagabhatla and Manhas 2026). The question pursued here is narrower than the legal merits of either position. It concerns what the conduct of the treaty's original architect reveals about the normative standing of the treaty itself. An institution that built a norm, and accumulated six decades of informal custodial authority over it, adopted a largely procedural account of its role at the moment the norm came under its heaviest strain. This paper treats the Bank as a norm-bearing actor and asks what that posture does to the treaty's standing.

The argument of this paper is that the Bank's silence, in the sense of declining to speak for the treaty's survival while commenting on its text, contributed to the de-socialization of an inter-subjective standard that the Bank had helped construct through nearly a decade of negotiation and whose authority it had helped sustain ever since. The claim is deliberately bounded. The Permanent Indus Commission last met, so far as the sources reviewed show, in May 2022 (Tribune India 2022), so the treaty's practice was already weakening before the abeyance. The Bank's posture is treated as a contributing condition of that decline, not as its cause.

The posture matters because international organizations do not only administer agreements; they teach states what counts as appropriate conduct (Finnemore 1996; Barnett and Finnemore 2004), and an institution that narrows its own role at the moment a norm is contested sends a signal to the parties, to the arbitral bodies and to other riparian states. A realist reading, in which the abeyance follows from a shifting balance of costs and opportunities, explains the timing but not the six decades of restraint that preceded it. The paper therefore sets the two accounts against each other and asks which explains more of what the record shows.

The Treaty as a Normative Project, and Its Record of Strain

David Lilienthal's 1951 proposal for a joint authority over the Indus Basin (Salman and Uprety 2002) rested on the functionalist premise, associated with Mitrany (1943), that cooperation in technical, welfare-relevant domains could build habits of cooperation that political negotiation had failed to produce. The Bank adopted the premise, and the long negotiation was itself a norm-building exercise: the aim was an institutional environment in which water-sharing became an expected practice between two states whose relationship was otherwise adversarial (Salman and Uprety 2002). The settlement was a partition of rivers more than a sharing of waters: India received the eastern rivers, and Pakistan the western rivers, which carry most of the basin's flow.

The treaty has been contested in Indian domestic politics from the outset. Parliamentary exchanges between September and November 1960 included an adjournment motion moved by Narayan Gore on November 16, a question of privilege raised by Atal Bihari Vajpayee over whether ratification was complete, and a long debate on November 30, in which Ashok Mehta argued that India was making significant concessions unilaterally while Pakistan's obligations were ignored (Pioneer 2021). Newspapers of the period spoke of 'concessions after concessions' (Pioneer 2021). Critics have since returned to that language, and the allocation remains a staple of Indian political argument. Sinha (2025) offers an interpretation of the treaty's history and of its 2025 suspension in his book and in the discussion held at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA 2025); the part of his account that bears on the argument here, the dual symbolism of abeyance, is taken up in the subsequent sections of this paper.

The treaty's durability is the datum around which the theoretical argument turns. Compliance continued through the wars of 1965 and 1971, through the 1999 Kargil conflict, and through the 2001–02 military mobilization, and the Permanent Indus Commission functioned as one of very few bilateral channels that survived such periods (Salman and Uprety 2002; Wolf 2007). A material account of this record is available: India had interests in legitimate hydropower development under the treaty, and Pakistan's irrigated agriculture depends overwhelmingly on the western rivers (Mustafa 2010). But those interests were present throughout, including at moments when upstream coercion was militarily conceivable. Jangra's (2026) account of a compliance asymmetry, in which India's restraint exceeded its legal minimum, points in the same direction. A constructivist account adds that the practice of compliance had become part of how the two states understood their relationship, and that restraint on this point was sustained by inter-subjective understandings as much as by calculation (Wendt 1999).

The abeyance was preceded by years of visible strain. Following the Uri attack of 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statement that 'blood and water can't flow together at the same time' was widely read as the first high-level linkage of the treaty to the security relationship. On December 12, 2016,

the Bank declared a pause in the two processes through which Pakistan had sought a Court of Arbitration and India a Neutral Expert on the Kishanganga and Ratle projects, so that the parties could consider other ways of resolving the disagreement, and it resumed them on April 6, 2022, on the ground that 'the lack of success in finding an acceptable solution over the past five years is also a risk to the Treaty itself' (World Bank 2022b). India served notices seeking modification of the treaty in January 2023 and again in September 2024, citing changed circumstances (Business Standard 2023; Onmanorama 2024). The Permanent Indus Commission last met in May 2022 (Tribune India 2022).

This sequence matters analytically in two ways. It shows that the erosion of the treaty's practice began well before the abeyance, which constrains any claim that the Bank's 2025 posture was its cause. It also shows that the Bank, in 2022, had publicly voiced a concern about the treaty's survival in terms that went beyond procedure.

Theoretical Framework

Wendt's (1992) claim that 'anarchy is what states make of it' challenged the structural determinism of neorealism by holding that the identities and interests of states are constituted through interaction and shared understandings, not given in advance. Katzenstein (1996) showed empirically that security behaviour is shaped by norms and identities that materialist models exclude by assumption. For the Indus Basin, the implication is that the treaty's durability should be read as a product of the inter-subjective environment built around it, in addition to the balance of material interests.

Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) describe a three-stage life cycle: emergence, driven by norm entrepreneurs with an organizational platform; cascade, in which states adopt the norm for reasons of legitimacy and conformity; and internalization, in which compliance becomes routine and is no longer consciously debated. The Bank fits the role of entrepreneur in the first stage, the administrative apparatus of the Commission and the two national commissioners the second, and the treaty's survival through crises the third. The framework, however, treats internalization as an endpoint. It says little about how an internalized norm becomes contested again, or about what a norm entrepreneur does, or fails to do, when that begins.

Sandholtz (2008) offers a partial answer. He distinguishes breaches that provoke counter pressure and repair from sustained, publicly justified departures that argue the norm no longer binds the actor, and he treats the latter as the mechanism by which a norm loses authority. Applied here, the question is whether India's conduct since 2023, namely the modification notices, the appeal to changed circumstances, and the conditional abeyance, amounts to a justified departure of that kind, and what the response of the treaty's custodian contributes to that process. Barnett and Finnemore (2004) supply the organizational half of the argument: international organizations constitute normative environments through the categories they apply and the roles they accept, so a narrow reading of their own mandate is a choice with consequences for the norms they once helped construct.

A realist reading is parsimonious. Morgenthau (1948), Waltz (1979) and Mearsheimer (2001) converge on the expectation that an upper riparian state with a deteriorating security relationship and a downstream rival dependent on its flows will use that leverage when an opportunity is available. On this account the treaty's durability reflected a cost-benefit balance that shifted by 2025 as water stress,

hydropower ambitions and the political context changed. Indian commentary offers a version of this logic in its own terms: Makhija (2025) describes the abeyance as a tactical pause that serves as leverage against cross-border terrorism.

The realist reading explains the timing of the abeyance. It is less successful on two points. The first is the length of the restraint. India was the upper riparian throughout the wars of 1965 and 1971, and it did not suspend performance. To say that costs then outweighed benefits relocates the explanation into a calculation that is hard to distinguish from the interest-based accounts constructivists themselves allow, stripped of any account of why the costs were perceived as they were. The second is the gap between declared abeyance and operational conduct. The greater risk lies in the erosion of technical communication, not in an outright cutoff, and that the rhetoric of both sides overstates the immediate threat. A norm that has been publicly repudiated but whose operational content is still largely observed is what a constructivist would expect; a realist account must treat it as an anomaly. The two readings are therefore treated here as competing accounts of different parts of the puzzle, not as exclusive alternatives.

The analysis proceeds by process tracing, supported by discourse analysis of the Bank's public statements. Three observable indications are used to judge whether erosion is under way. The first is departure language: official statements that deny or qualify the norm's binding force, as in the reference to abeyance and changed circumstances. The second is the lapse of institutional practice, such as the non-meeting of the Permanent Indus Commission since May 2022 and the substitution of diplomatic channels for treaty channels in the 2025 flood warnings. The third is the custodian's response, measured by whether the Bank's public statements continue to treat the treaty's survival as a concern of its own. The sources are public documents: World Bank press releases and presidential remarks, Indian and Pakistani official statements, arbitral releases as reported, and published commentary. Because most of these are official or press accounts, statements by the Indian and Pakistani governments and by their commentators are treated as claims to be reported and analyzed, not as findings. The analysis is confined to the treaty's institutional and normative record and takes no position on the factual or political claims advanced by either side. The Bank's silence is a finding about the public record, not about private diplomacy, which this study cannot observe.

From Abeyance to the Award

The Cabinet Committee on Security announcement of April 23, 2025 chose the term 'abeyance', which appears nowhere in the treaty. Its conditional formulation, tying restoration to Pakistan 'credibly and irrevocably' abjuring support for cross-border terrorism, made the measure a coercive instrument whose lifting depended on a political demand rather than a technical review. Indian officials have consistently repeated the formula. In July 2026 the Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson, Randhir Jaiswal, said that India's position on the treaty was 'consistent' and that Pakistan must 'credibly and irrevocably renounce its support for cross-border terrorism' (All India Radio 2026), and in the statement of August, 31, India said the suspension would continue until Pakistan 'credibly and irrevocably' ends that support (Free Press Journal 2026b).

Sinha's (2025) reading of the abeyance, developed in the discussion of his book at the Indian Council of World Affairs, is that it carries two symbolic meanings at once. Externally, it is calibrated pressure

on Pakistan to alter its conduct. Internally, it signals to a domestic audience that the waters of the western rivers will be used for national development, a message condensed in Modi's formulation that water and blood cannot flow together and in his address of May 12, 2025, in which he said India's water would flow for India's benefit (ICWA 2025; Modi 2025). The framework is useful for the argument here because it identifies two registers in which the norm was reframed, security and development, and suggests why a restoration of the status quo ante would require movement on both.

The treaty's institutional machinery, already dormant, became the site of concrete difficulty during the 2025 monsoon. India communicated flood warnings to Pakistan through diplomatic channels in August 2025, describing the step as humanitarian, rather than through the Permanent Indus Commission the treaty provides for (Asia News Network 2025). Pakistan's Indus Waters Commissioner, Syed Muhammad Mehar Ali Shah, said in June 2026 that he had written four times since April 2025 to his Indian counterpart about fluctuations in the Chenab flow and had received no reply (Dawn 2026). These are Pakistani accounts and India has not accepted the characterization of its flow operations. The point for the present analysis is that the absence of a shared data channel makes natural variation and upstream operation difficult to distinguish, which in turn feeds the securitization of the discourse.

On the Indian side, the abeyance has been accompanied by work on western-river hydropower projects, among them Ratle on the Chenab, whose dam wall is the subject of the Court's interim order (Free Press Journal 2026b; Express Tribune 2026). Pakistan has accused India of seeking to 'weaponise' water through projects on the Chenab (AFP 2026); India's position is that it is no longer bound by the treaty (Ranjan 2025).

The Court of Arbitration, constituted in 2022 on Pakistan's request in respect of the Kishanganga and Ratle projects, has issued a series of rulings since the abeyance. A Supplemental Award of June 27, 2025, held that the abeyance did not limit its competence, and India responded that it was 'no longer bound to perform any of its obligations under the Treaty' (Ranjan 2025). An award on general interpretation followed on August 8, 2025 (Ranjan 2025). A May 2026 award on maximum pondage held that India could store less live water in its planned reservoirs than its designs assumed, and India rejected it as 'null and void' (The Week 2026). After Pakistan applied in March 2026 for a determination of the treaty's status, hearings were held at the Peace Palace on April 26 to 28, 2026, with only Pakistan present (Al Jazeera 2026). On August 31, 2026, the Court issued an Award on the Status of the Treaty and an Order on Interim Measures, finding unanimously that none of the grounds India had cited, including its sovereignty and material breach arguments, could justify suspension or termination, and restricting concreting of the Ratle dam wall and power intake until 90 days after the Neutral Expert's final decision, expected in July 2027 (Free Press Journal 2026b; Express Tribune 2026).

India's response the same day was categorical. The Ministry of External Affairs said the 'so-called Court was constituted by the World Bank in patent breach of the terms of the Treaty', that India 'has never appeared before this body', and that it 'categorically rejects its so-called award' (The Week 2026). Pakistan welcomed the ruling, said the treaty remains 'fully applicable and binding', and said it would consider how the award 'may best assist in finding a pathway back to the parties' engagement under the treaty' (Free Press Journal 2026a; Express Tribune 2026). The ruling has therefore settled the legal question as the Court saw it without altering conduct, which suggests that the difficulty lay less in the absence of a legal ruling than in the lapse of the treaty's day-to-day practice.

Rhetoric on both sides hardened through 2026. India's Water Resources Minister, C. R. Patil, told the news agency Asian News International in June 2026 that 'it is certain, not a single drop of water will go' to Pakistan 'in the coming years' (AFP 2026). Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, Pakistan's former foreign minister, was reported in July 2026 to have tied any restriction of Pakistan's access to the Indus system to national survival and to Pakistan's nuclear doctrine (Pioneer 2026). Pakistan's army chief, Field Marshal Asim Munir, was reported by ISAS to have told the Pakistani diaspora in Tampa in August 2025 that Pakistan would destroy any dam India built (Ranjan 2025). On the eve of Pakistan's Independence Day in 2026, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif described every drop of Pakistan's water as a 'red line' (Business Today 2026). These statements are reported here as evidence of the discursive register, in which a technical allocation has become a vehicle for deterrent signalling, and not as assessments of either side's actual intentions.

The World Bank Between Procedure and Normativity

The Bank's public position after the abeyance has been delivered in three registers. A Bank spokesperson said, days after the announcement, that the Bank 'did not opine on treaty-related sovereign decisions taken by its member countries' and described its own role as limited to a defined set of tasks; the same report, citing a government source, said India had not informed the Bank of its decision because Pakistan had been notified (Outlook India 2025). On May 9, 2025, Banga, in remarks the Press Information Bureau carried from a post on X, said: 'We have no role to play, beyond that of a facilitator', that the Bank's role 'is merely that of a facilitator', and that speculation that it would step in to resolve the dispute was 'all bunk' (Tribune India 2025). In an interview with CNBC-TV18 reported on May 15, he added: 'There is no provision in the treaty to allow for suspension the way it was drawn up. It either needs to be gone, or replaced by another one' (The Standard 2025).

The three registers are analytically separable. The remark on suspension was a legal clarification about the treaty, which provides that its provisions 'shall continue in force until terminated by a duly ratified treaty concluded for that purpose between the two Governments' (Indus Waters Treaty 1960, Article XII(4)). The spokesperson's statement and Banga's 'facilitator' and 'bunk' remarks were statements about the Bank. It is in those that the retreat from custodial voice is located.

The Bank's own earlier language sets the 2025 posture in relief. When it resumed the two processes on April 6, 2022, its press release acknowledged the concerns of both parties about concurrent proceedings and then added that the failure to find a solution over five years was 'also a risk to the Treaty itself', pledging to 'act in good faith and with complete impartiality and transparency' (World Bank 2022b). When it made its appointments in October 2022 of Michel Lino as Neutral Expert and Sean Murphy as Chairman of the Court of Arbitration, it said it did so because the treaty required it after India and Pakistan had each made requests (World Bank 2022a). These statements are procedural in form, but the first places the treaty's survival among the considerations the Bank weighed and says so publicly. Nothing comparable has been located in the Bank's communications after April 2025. Jangra (2026) has noted the Bank's statements of 2016 and 2022 about its 'limited' role and observed that India sees the Bank 'as a witness to a bilateral contract, while Pakistan sees it as a guarantor'. The difference between those two readings of the Bank's role is the ground on which its 2025 posture has to be assessed.

The Bank's position is complicated by the fact that its procedural conduct is itself contested. India's position, as reported, is that the technical questions belong in the 'sequential Neutral Expert process' and that the Court was 'constituted by the World Bank in patent breach of the terms of the Treaty' (Free Press Journal 2026b; The Week 2026). The Bank had itself acknowledged the concern over concurrent proceedings when it resumed the two processes in 2022 (World Bank 2022b). From India's standpoint, then, the Bank was overactive in 2022; from the standpoint of this paper, it was underactive in 2025. The two assessments are not contradictory, and together they help explain the Bank's retreat. An institution accused by one party of acting in breach of the treaty, and dependent on both parties as borrowers, has strong incentives to define its role as narrowly as the text permits. That is rational for the institution. The argument here is that its normative consequences for the treaty are distinct from its institutional rationality.

Barnett and Finnemore (2004) argue that international organizations are bureaucracies whose mandates and procedures shape what they are willing to see as their business, and that this can produce behaviour that is rational for the organization and unresponsive to the purposes of its founders. The Bank's confinement of its role to that of a facilitator fits that pattern. It also bears on Finnemore's (1996) account of organizations as teachers of norms: an institution teaches through the signals it sends about what it regards as appropriate conduct, and a public refusal to treat a departure from the treaty as relevant to its own founding purposes teaches that the question is not one for the Bank. That lesson is available to both parties and to other riparian states watching the case.

Norm De-Socialization, Custodial Normativity and Systemic Implications

Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) define a norm as a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity, which ties norm change to identity change. On the reading developed here, India's public position since 2023 amounts to a recasting of its identity in relation to the basin, from an upper riparian that accepted a constrained allocation as a feature of responsible co-riparianism to a sovereign whose security obligations take precedence over treaty constraints. India's own framing is that the abeyance is a lawful and temporary response to cross-border terrorism (Makhija 2025). That position has been legally elaborated, publicly sustained and attached to a conditional demand, which matches the features Sandholtz (2008) associates with erosion as distinct from isolated breach. Sinha's (2025) reading adds that the reframing operates in both the security and the developmental registers.

Two qualifications keep the argument honest. First, the Permanent Indus Commission's dormancy since May 2022 and the Bank's own 2016 pause show that the treaty's cooperative practice was weakening before the abeyance, so de-socialization was already underway when the Bank adopted its 2025 posture. Second, the Bank did not formally have custodial responsibility; the treaty confers specific, limited roles. What this paper calls custodial authority is informal and rests on six decades of association, which is why its withdrawal is hard to point to in any document. The claim is accordingly that the Bank's posture removed a source of normative counter-pressure that might have slowed erosion, not that it caused it.

An objection follows from these qualifications. A statement from the Bank would not have bound India, and nothing in the public record shows that a stronger Bank voice would have changed the decision of April 2025. The claim does not depend on that counterfactual. Norm theory treats the

standing of a norm as a matter of the community that watches it as well as the compliance of any one actor (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). On this view, what a custodian says or withholds is addressed to other states, to the second party to the treaty and to the arbitral bodies that apply it, as much as to the state in breach. Silence in that setting may be read, correctly or not, as a signal about how much weight the norm carries among those best placed to defend it. The evidence offered here cannot show how that signal was read inside Indian or Pakistani decision making, which the public record does not reveal. It shows only that the Bank withdrew a form of public support it had previously given, and that the withdrawal coincided with the period in which the treaty's practice lapsed. The argument is, therefore, one about conditions and plausibility, not demonstrated causation, and it should be tested against any future disclosure of the Bank's internal deliberations or of the parties' own assessments.

Three implications follow. The first concerns what Young (2002) calls institutional interplay, where an environmental regime is embedded in a security conflict, as here, the security logic appears to displace the environmental norm. The Bank's decision to confine itself to a facilitating role between two nuclear-armed states is institutionally understandable, but it exposes a gap. No institution in the present architecture is both authoritative enough to assert water-governance norms against a state and insulated enough from diplomatic risk to do so in a crisis of this kind. The treaty's design placed its durability in technical machinery that was meant to be insulated from politics (Salman and Uprety 2002), and that same technicality limits the Bank's capacity to defend it once the political context changes.

The second concerns custodial normativity, defined here as the capacity of an institution to sustain a norm's legitimacy through accumulated reputational authority in the absence of enforcement. Keohane (1984) argued that institutions sustain cooperation by creating reputational stakes that raise the cost of defection. The Bank has no enforcement power over the treaty, but its public voice was one of the few instruments available to raise such costs. Authority of this kind is a depreciating asset: it is built by being exercised, and each decision not to exercise it at a moment of strain makes the next exercise less credible. Other transboundary agreements in which the Bank holds a facilitating role will read the Indus case as evidence of how far that voice extends.

The third is the most general. The Indus case suggests that well-institutionalized norms remain contingent on the political conditions that sustained them. The template the treaty offered to other contested basins depended on willing external facilitation, an alignment of interests and the absence of an existential security conflict, and it cannot be assumed to travel. Jangra's (2026) observation of a gradual erosion of the earlier insulation between water governance and the security relationship points the same way: agreements whose day-to-day maintenance lapses become vulnerable to the first serious political shock, whatever the strength of the text.

Conclusion

What April 2025 revealed is not simply that India suspended a treaty or that Pakistan protested vigorously. Those are facts of political history. What is theoretically significant is the triangular configuration: a state that, after six decades as a party, has declared the treaty in abeyance; a downstream state appealing to the institution that engineered the treaty for its defence; and that institution declining, through a precise act of procedural self-limitation, to exercise the normative authority its historic

role had accumulated. In the analytical language of this paper, this is a case of custodial withdrawal, in which the Bank's silence was not neutral but a contributing condition of the norm's declining authority. Custodial withdrawal is used here for an institution's decision to stop exercising informal normative authority it has accumulated, without any formal obligation having been breached. The constructivist reading developed here treats that configuration as one of de-socialization. The realist reading explains why the opportunity arose but not the six decades of restraint that preceded it or the continuing gap between declared abeyance and operational conduct. The persistence of the suspension after a unanimous arbitral ruling is a development that the norm-dynamics literature reviewed here does not fully anticipate.

The paper has attempted to be precise about the limits of its claim. The Bank did not cause the erosion, which began earlier and has multiple sources; the Bank's procedural acts are contested by India as overreach; and the Bank's formal responsibilities under the treaty are narrow. The argument is that the line between procedure and normative voice matters for what remains of a norm when its political support weakens, and that the Bank's choice to draw that line narrowly in 2025 has consequences beyond the Indus.

The Indus rivers are not dry, and the treaty's text, as the Court of Arbitration held, remains in force as a matter of law, a ruling India does not accept (Free Press Journal 2026b). The inter-subjective norm that made water-sharing between India and Pakistan taken for granted, that made it, in Wendt's (1999) terms, part of what the two states are in relation to each other, is in a different condition: publicly contested, placed in abeyance by one party, and dependent on political conditions that the sources reviewed here show to be largely absent.

Three questions remain open. The first is whether the August 2026 award, together with the Neutral Expert's decision expected in July 2027, can serve as a basis for normative repair in the absence of bilateral engagement; legal rulings do not rebuild political norms without political agency behind them. The second is whether the case is representative of a wider pattern in agreements brokered by development institutions or is particular to the depth of India–Pakistan hostility. The third is whether design changes, such as formally recognized custodial mandates, independent norm-advocacy functions, and mechanisms that insulate normative authority from the institution's operational relationships with the parties, could make such agreements more resilient to securitization. The treaty was built on the premise that water could be kept apart from war. Its fate may depend on whether anyone is still prepared to say so.

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