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HYDRO-POLITICS AND REGIONAL SECURITY IN THE KABUL RIVER BASIN: A REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan and Afghanistan share the Kabul River Basin, but political instability in Afghanistan and security challenges have prevented the formulation of a bilateral water-sharing agreement. This paper employs a qualitative research method using the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to analyse the Kabul River Basin, not simply as a growing environmental concern, but as a latent security issue within the Pakistan-Afghanistan-India-China regional sub-complex. It argues that with increasing Indian influence and investments in Afghanistan's hydro infrastructure, the risk of future water-related tensions looms large. However, China's recent interest in building water infrastructure in Afghanistan presents a new strategic opportunity for Pakistan; the outcome depends on Pakistan's ability to achieve a balanced negotiated framework while catering to the India factor. Thus, the central question is how Pakistan can capitalise on China's involvement to initiate proactive trilateral cooperation and avert the securitisation of water in an already volatile region. By integrating hydro politics into the logic of RSCT, the paper provides a framework to rethink water diplomacy in South Asia before the Kabul River Basin becomes a new frontier for regional contestation.

KEYWORDS: Kabul River Basin, Kunar River, Hydro politics, RSCT, China, Pakistan, Afghanistan.

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INTRODUCTION

With the rise in global population, rapid socio-economic development, and environmental stress, water conflicts have risen sharply in the past two decades (Michel, 2024). These conflicts become more complex when the water resources are unequally distributed, not governed under a legal framework, and prone to natural calamities (Yaqoob & Arjjumend, 2024). The Kabul River Basin (KRB) is one such case that continues to strain relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. In the case of the KRB, Afghanistan is considered the upper riparian state while Pakistan is mistakenly viewed as the lower riparian state. In actuality, however, Pakistan is both an upper and lower riparian based on the fact that the Kunar River, a major tributary of the Kabul River, emanates from the Hindu Kush range in Chitral district of Pakistan, traverses eastern Afghanistan, flows into the Kabul River at Jalalabad, and eventually re-enters Pakistan to merge with the Indus River in Attock.

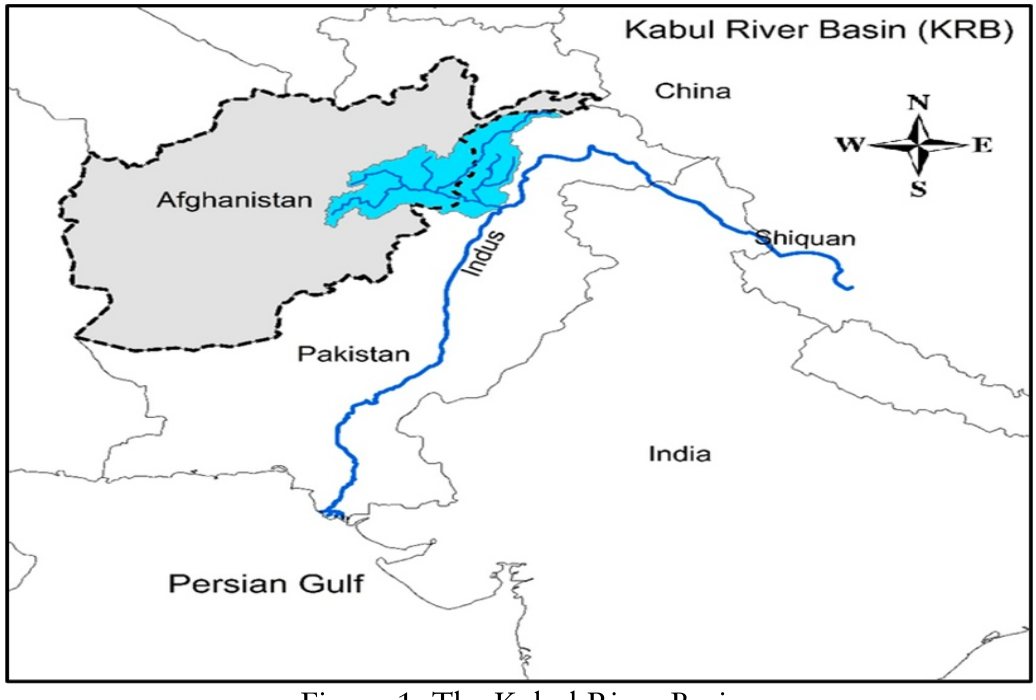


Figure 1: The Kabul River Basin
Source: (Taraky, Liu, McBean, Daggupati, & Gharabaghi, 2021).

Pakistan's total annual water availability stands at 175 billion cubic meters (bcm), for which the country primarily relies on the Indus water system (Pakistan Council of Research in Water Resources, 2023). The KRB provides 15 to 20 per cent of the total water in the Indus, which amounts to 20 bcm of water per year (Pakistan Council of Research in Water Resources, 2023). The Kabul River is an important part of Pakistan's Indus system and is especially crucial to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for irrigation, hydropower generation in the Warsak dam, and domestic consumption. Similarly, KRB is fundamental to Afghanistan's socio-economic growth, agricultural output, and electricity demands. To meet these fundamental needs, Afghanistan seeks to build dams on the Kabul River and its tributaries, a move that can instigate a dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Pakistan and Afghanistan do not have any bilateral agreement to secure Pakistan's annual water flows while providing Afghanistan with the space to construct dams. Pakistan believes that dam construction on the Kabul River would decrease the water flow to the Indus, causing water insecurity. This threat is compounded when external actors force their interests in an already contested space, giving birth to hydro politics. In recent years, India has expressed significant interest in Afghanistan's water infrastructure as a tool to control the region's water resources (Indian Defence Research Wing, 2025). It has raised concerns in Pakistan for both national security and geopolitical reasons. Moreover, after the Taliban takeover, China's interest in Afghanistan's dam infrastructure is also increasing under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) objectives, for which a developing and stable Afghanistan is an important prerequisite (Zhang F. , 2022). Expanding Chinese influence in the region is another major factor behind increased Indian interest in Afghanistan. The bilateral and regional rivalry between India and China has intensified the regional security threats and mistrust between the regional powers (Yousuf, 2023).

Such dynamics have led the region towards hydro-politics, which can be understood as the "investigation of water conflict to uncover the tensions among competing interests, as well as the types of political, imaginary, and symbolic relations which the issue of water mobilises" (Trottier, 1999). The RSCT offers a powerful lens to understand the securitisation of water amid regional power rivalries. It posits that security threats emanate from within the region due to conflicting interests between neighbouring states (Buzan

& Waever, 2003). This paper highlights how hydro-politics in the Kabul River basin has given birth to a sub-complex in the broader South Asian regional complex. While the existing literature discusses a multitude of factors explaining hydro-politics in the KRB, it fails to acknowledge that while the growing footprint of China poses a threat to India, it also presents strategic opportunities for Pakistan. Pakistan and China can engage Afghanistan in trilateral projects, which include joint dam construction and hydropower generation. This gap justifies the claim that although rising hydro-politics brings challenges, it may also create space for the convergence of interests and cooperation.

Against this backdrop, this paper argues that China's increasing interest and involvement offer Pakistan a window of opportunity to enhance cooperation with Afghanistan through trilateral hydro diplomacy. However, Chinese involvement will not automatically yield the desired outcomes for Pakistan. Rather, Pakistan will have to develop a negotiated trilateral framework to benefit from China's involvement in the issue. The central question addressed in the paper is how China's growing involvement in Afghanistan's hydro-infrastructure reshapes the regional security dynamics of the Kabul River Basin and what strategic options this creates for Pakistan. Subsidiary questions include: i) How can RSCT explain the securitisation of water in the Pakistan-Afghanistan-India-China sub-complex? ii) What are the risks and opportunities of Chinese involvement in KRB hydro-infrastructure for Pakistan? Under what conditions can trilateral hydro-diplomacy among Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China be operationalised? By integrating hydro-politics into the logic of RSCT, this paper attempts to devise a mechanism to initiate a trilateral water-sharing arrangement in the KRB.

REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY (RSCT)

Regions are a relatively new but significant component of the International Relations discourse. The first debate around regions began with European regionalism at the end of World War II. The second debate started with the RSCT framework of Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, which renders regions and respective regional powers as the essential third tier of the three-tier international security structure. A regional security complex (RSC) is "a set of units whose major processes of securitisation and de-securitisation or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be

analysed or resolved apart from one another" (Buzan & Waever, 2003). Thus, the regional states are intertwined in a way (particularly concerning physical adjacency) that internal security conditions or threats of one state have a spillover effect on the other. In most cases, however, these threats are securitised. Securitisation can be defined as "a process through which an issue is framed as an existential threat (to a referent object like a state, identity or environment), requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure" (Buzan, Waever, & De Wilde, 1998). Securitisation theorists emphasise that security is not objective but inter-subjectively constructed as political actors securitise certain matters as threats to justify their interests and objectives (Sarwar, 2018).

In RSCs, state relations are governed under the patterns of enmity and amity, based on multiple factors such as geography, resources, military capabilities, ideology, identity, etc. (Buzan, Waever, & De Wilde, 1998). This way, their security practices depend on each other. Based on what or whom states securitise, the region undergoes changes and reproduction. This means that RSCs are not permanent but can be reshaped depending on domestic security conditions, intra-state relations, intra-regional dynamics, and the role of global powers in the region (Buzan, Waever, & De Wilde, 1998).

PAKISTAN-AFGHANISTAN-INDIA-CHINA SUB-COMPLEX

When it comes to Afghanistan, Buzan and Waever call it an 'insulator state,' i.e., a unit standing at the junction of different RSCs with broader security dynamics at play. Given its geographical location, Afghanistan is situated at the intersection of different RSCs, including Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. The regional security dynamics during the war on terror largely rendered Afghanistan as part of the Middle East, evident from the US democratisation goal of the 'Greater Middle East' (Nejad & Mohammadzadeh, 2018). However, after the 2021 withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan, the state appears to have tilted more towards South Asia. Several factors underpin this development: a complex security interplay between Afghanistan and Pakistan due to threats of increasing cross-border terrorism, India's strategic expansion into Afghanistan, and China's expanding interests under its BRI objectives. The poor security situation in Afghanistan directly translates into security threats in Pakistan and India, and for the Chinese BRI infrastructure throughout the region. These

dynamics, combined with the historic India-Pakistan and Sino-Indian rivalries, highlight the security interconnectedness between the states under consideration, thus rendering these units as a regional sub-complex in the broader South Asian RSC. With the new Taliban government in power, understanding Afghanistan as a component of the South Asian regional security sub-complex would help understand the regional dynamics surrounding transboundary water resources and their securitisation for political gains.

ATTEMPTS FOR A BILATERAL WATER SHARING AGREEMENT

During the colonial era, a transboundary water governance framework existed between British India and the Afghan government. The Durand Line delineated the British and Afghan spheres of influence and governed transboundary water issues. Adopted in 1921, the framework allowed residents of Torkham in Afghanistan to use water through a pipeline in exchange for using only the waters of the Kabul River for shipping and crop irrigation by British officers (Lautze, Meelad, & Hayat, 2023). Upon independence, Pakistan inherited the Durand Line Agreement, but Afghanistan did not ratify any formal agreement on border issues or shared water resources with Pakistan (Yaqoob & Arjjumend, 2024).

In 2005, Pakistan emphasised the need for a treaty to determine long-term water availability projections after India announced support for 12 dam projects on the Kabul River, which could cause a substantial reduction in water flow to Pakistan. In 2006, both the World Bank and USAID offered arbitration between Pakistan and Afghanistan, but Afghan officials rebuffed all attempts at negotiations. In 2011, as part of its capacity-building projects in Afghanistan, the World Bank offered the formulation of the KRB Management Commission for enhancing collaboration between the two neighbours, increasing institutional capacity, promoting data sharing, and improving the Kabul River management plan through hydraulic, hydrological, and economic modelling (World Bank, 2018). However, political constraints undermined the formulation of any such commission.

Little progress occurred in 2013 as the relevant federal ministers of Pakistan and Afghanistan signed an MoU for joint hydropower production on the Kunar River, but no implementation took place (Lautze, Meelad, & Hayat, 2023). In 2014, the World Bank called the water and foreign ministry officials of Pakistan and Afghanistan for a dialogue on mutual development

of techniques for the exchange of water-related data and water distribution frameworks; however, there was no follow-up meeting (World Bank, 2018). In 2015, Afghanistan held a trilateral meeting with China and Pakistan in Kabul for the joint hydropower production of 1500 MW on the Kabul River. While this initiative holds immense potential and offers a win-win solution for all stakeholders, it has not been operationalised despite China's willingness to finance the project.

The major factors behind failed operationalisation included political instability in Afghanistan and security threats emanating from within its borders. Later in 2015, the UNDP hosted an event in Islamabad where the Ministry of Energy and Water (MEW) of Afghanistan and the Ministry of Climate Change of Pakistan agreed to collaborate on the issues of glacier lake outburst floods, which impart significant infrastructural damage to the lower riparian state (Lautze, Meelad, & Hayat, 2023). Despite multiple attempts at bilateral water cooperation, factors such as political mistrust, institutional and security impediments, and financial challenges have prevented any conclusive agreement. Another structural obstacle is the absence of a national water policy in Afghanistan. While Pakistan formulated its National Water Policy in 2018, Afghanistan still lacks one (Kakakhel & Jan, 2024).

HYDRO-POLITICS IN THE KABUL RIVER BASIN

Although water is a shared resource, the challenges of cooperation multiply in transboundary water resources. To ensure that water is effectively distributed and managed across state borders, it is essential to critically consider aspects such as geography, socio-economic norms, state of infrastructure, economic efficiency, political situation, and the probability of conflicts. Divergence of interests often results in interstate competition instead of cooperation. In the case of the KRB, water rights discussions are solely based on the upstream and downstream paradigm, which limits the discussion to sovereignty and territorial integrity, resulting in a conflict (Andik & Mianabadi, 2023). The dispute over water sharing is not simply technical but part of the broader economic, political, and security issues between Pakistan and Afghanistan. After several attempts for a water-sharing agreement up till 2015, Pakistan and Afghanistan are now following a unilateral water strategy (Malik, 2019). With every state pursuing its interests, the region has become a brewing theatre for hydro-politics. This

section examines the viewpoints, objectives, and interests of each state involved in the regional hydro-politics over the KRB.

AFGHANISTAN'S PERSPECTIVE

Afghanistan is naturally rich in water resources, yet water governance has never been a concern for ruling elites. Despite abundant water resources, Afghanistan has been unable to meet the needs of its 43.4 million population (United Nations Population Fund, 2025). Statistics show that around 75 billion cubic meters of water flows through the country's major and minor river basins annually, but only 33-35 per cent is utilised, limited to irrigation (Manhas, 2024). Similarly, for its energy needs, Afghanistan is dependent on its Central Asian neighbours despite the potential to generate more than 23,000 MW of electricity per annum. Currently, it produces roughly 300 MW (Kakakhel & Jan, The Kabul River Basin: Cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan for Shared Benefits, 2024).

In addition to infrastructural challenges, Afghanistan also faces financial constraints, unskilled human resources, and an unwillingness to engage in a political process to resolve disputes surrounding transboundary water resources. This shows that not the lack of available water resources but its ineffective and unsustainable management is the cause of Afghanistan's water insecurity (Manhas, 2024). Highlighting the same, Ismail Khan, Afghanistan's former minister for energy and water, expressed that effective water management will solve Afghanistan's several problems like drugs, violence and immigration (Afghanistan International, 2025). This shows the nexus between Afghanistan's complex socio-political issues and water mismanagement.

RSCT also helps understand that not just hydrological imperatives but also an entanglement of developmental imperatives and sovereignty assertions drive water securitisation in Afghanistan. The acute electricity shortages in Afghanistan severely constrains its socio-economic recovery. This makes dam construction a matter of national survival rather than geopolitical manoeuvring. Climate change and glacial retreat in the Hindu Kush region further intensify water insecurity across the basin. This creates pressures that no government in Kabul, regardless of its political constituency and orientation, could easily ignore. RSCT identifies this as evidence of environmental stress amplifying existing patterns of enmity. With deepening resource scarcity, the securitising moves of upper riparian states acquire

greater urgency and legitimacy in domestic political contexts. This becomes acceptable to the domestic politics of the upper riparian, even if it exacerbates anxieties downstream.

In 2016, India and Afghanistan conducted feasibility studies to build 12 dams on the Kabul River, the Shahtoot Dam being one of them (Mustafa, 2016). In February 2021, India and Afghanistan signed a USD 236 million deal to build the Shahtoot dam on the Maidan River, a tributary of the Kabul River (Simon, 2021). However, the progress on the project was halted due to a regime change. The October 2025 tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan prompted the Taliban government to renew debate on dam construction on the Kunar River (Afghanistan International, 2025). Afghan analysts and the Taliban maintain that dam construction is crucial for addressing Afghanistan's water shortages and energy needs (Manhas, 2024), though these claims are contested by Pakistan on legal grounds.

INDIAN INVOLVEMENT

India's strategic engagement with Afghanistan had two significant objectives. Firstly, India seeks to prevent the resurgence of a fundamentalist Islamic regime in Afghanistan, which would add to its tfhreat perceptions regarding Kashmir and domestic security. Secondly, it aims to expand its sphere of influence to achieve its goals of regional dominance and isolate Pakistan (Farooq, 2022). In the pre-2021 period, given its active presence in Afghanistan, the US directly supported India's increasing involvement under the rhetoric of Afghanistan's rehabilitation and development assistance (Majeed & Bashir, 2023). The cooperation strengthened following 2014 as both countries underwent government changes with PM Modi and President Ashraf Ghani coming to power in India and Afghanistan, respectively. India has been involved in several infrastructural projects, including the construction of the Salma Dam, a 202-kilometre power transmission line between Kabul and Pul-e-Khumri, the Zaranj-Delaram highway, etc. (Majeed & Bashir, 2023). RSCT's framework of patterns of enmity explains that India's involvement in Afghan hydro-infrastructure provides evidence of its intent to weaponise water, given the Indian leadership's statements on the Indus Water Treaty aimed at its securitisation and ultimate unilateral suspension. This creates a dimension of a broader securitisation process in which Pakistan perceives encirclement across multiple domains simultaneously. Pakistani threat perceptions of Indian involvement may

exceed purely hydrological concerns. Infrastructure projects carry symbolic and strategic dimensions, which are inseparable from how Pakistani strategic discourse frames Indian intentions.

Since 2021, despite its first objective not being met, India has aspired to assert its position in Afghanistan's political landscape to shrink space for China and Pakistan (Khan U. , 2023). The increased Indian involvement in the KRB also comes in the wake of an expanding Chinese footprint in the region (Yousuf, 2023). India-China rivalry extending beyond borders has complicated regional security dynamics, adding a layer of mistrust between regional actors. Moreover, the increasing involvement also aligns with India's aim to become the region's net security provider under the US umbrella. Despite the Indus Water Treaty being in place, India has long been restricting Pakistan's water supply and now seeks to use Afghanistan as a tool for a similar purpose through infrastructure financing. India views the water dispute on the KRB as a zero-sum game, where India's gains would translate into Pakistan and China's losses (Atef, Sadeqinazhad, Farjaad, & Amatya, 2019).

PAKISTAN'S CONCERNS

For Pakistan, India's increasing involvement only creates divergence of interests in Afghan hydro-infrastructure, intensifying an existing pattern of enmity that RSCT identifies as structurally constitutive of the South Asian sub-complex. Pakistan's concerns are grounded in genuine downstream vulnerability, compounded by its structurally ambiguous riparian position. Therefore, these cannot be reduced to perception alone, as claimed by India. Pakistan is simultaneously an upper and a lower riparian in the KRB through the Chitral-Kunar system. Therefore, unilateral upstream construction directly threatens flows, which Pakistan itself contributes to the basin. While India-Afghanistan joint water projects can revive Afghanistan's agriculture-based economy, they threaten Pakistan's hydropower and agricultural needs (Malik, 2019). In this way, water, as a non-traditional security threat compounded by current developments, is multiplying threat perceptions of Pakistan and Afghanistan, negatively impacting their bilateral relations and the overall regional security conditions. Pakistan's concerns are multi-fold. Firstly, if India and Afghanistan initiate the construction of the Shahtoot Dam or any other dam on the Kabul River without an effective water management mechanism or a

treaty with Pakistan, it would threaten Pakistan's water supply. Experts have estimated that building the Shahtoot Dam would reduce the downstream flow by 16 to 17 per cent, affecting irrigation and agricultural production in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, generating food insecurity and impacting the livelihoods of millions of people (Mustafa, 2016). Secondly, a dam on the Kabul River could leave insufficient water for Pakistan's Warsak dam (243 MW capacity, irrigating 119,000 acres) (Israr, 2021).

Thirdly, and most importantly, India's growing attempts to deepen its footprint in Afghanistan pose direct threats to Pakistan's sovereignty. Its assistance in Afghan dam projects offers indirect leverage over transboundary flows, particularly in supporting Afghanistan's upstream control during periods of political crisis (Hassami, 2018). This dimension increases Pakistan's existing threat calculus where it is no longer just a question of India's presence in Afghanistan, but of India embedding itself in the very infrastructure that determines how much water reaches Pakistan. Most significantly, it can restrict Pakistan's access to Central Asia via Afghanistan, as India is actively working to operationalise the Chabahar port (Palihati, 2025). Furthermore, assistance in infrastructure development will offer India a political cover for an extended presence, enabling covert intelligence gathering and supporting anti-Pakistan militant groups (Thomas, 2014). Therefore, growing Indian presence in Afghanistan, even under development assistance rhetoric, raises strategic concerns for Pakistan.

CHINESE INTERESTS

Chinese interests in Afghanistan are quite diverse, ranging from regional security and connectivity to economic integration and natural resources. China and Afghanistan share a small strategic border but poor security conditions and suspected terrorist hideouts in the border area have halted any development. The US withdrawal of its troops in Afghanistan in August 2021 offered China a substantial opportunity to increase its influence (Ahmadzai & Khan, 2021). Traditionally, China has been wary in its interaction with Afghanistan, but recently, it has adopted a more proactive perspective. The primary interests of China in Afghanistan pertain to security and stability as it is geographically close to the South Asian RSC. An unstable Afghanistan is perceived by China as a breeding ground for terrorism, which significantly threatens its investments in the region (Zhang

F. , 2022). Moreover, Afghanistan is central to the BRI of China, as it is located at the heart of the Old Silk Road and could act as a conduit to the Middle East and Central Asia. Inclusion of Afghanistan in CPEC would enhance regional connectivity and provide shorter land routes to Central Asia. Thus, a stable Afghanistan is imperative for China's BRI objectives.

Secondly, the vast untapped natural resource wealth of Afghanistan, including hydrocarbons such as oil and gas, and minerals like lithium, copper, and rare earth metals, attracts China amid its fast-growing high-tech industries and green energy transition (Ahmed & Khalid, 2021). China has also expressed strong interest in Afghanistan's hydropower potential, both as a commercial and geopolitical opportunity. Chinese firms, with extensive experience in building such infrastructure throughout Asia and Africa, view Afghanistan as a potential market. In August 2024, Afghanistan's MEW announced that a Chinese firm had shown interest in financing the construction of three dams on the Kunar River with a collective hydropower capacity of 2,000 MW (Khan A. , 2024).

China's interest in Afghanistan's hydro-infrastructure serves strategic objectives. Firstly, greater regional influence allows China to counter Indian presence, maintain an upper hand in the regional security calculus, and protect its BRI interests (Rid, 2023). In hindsight, it would secure Pakistan's uninterrupted water flow from the KRB and reduce threat perception. Secondly, from a soft power perspective, investing in dam infrastructure in Afghanistan also makes China a key player in environmental and infrastructural diplomacy (Rid, 2023). Therefore, assisting in the construction of climate-resilient infrastructure would not only be commercially beneficial for Chinese firms but also enhance China's image as a responsible regional power.

CHINA AS PAKISTAN'S NEW STRATEGIC OPTION

Given the aforementioned Chinese interests in Afghanistan, Pakistan can leverage its strategic alliance with China to pursue trilateral hydro-diplomacy initiatives. However, two diverging views characterise Chinese involvement in the issue. One views China as a neutral stabiliser and the other views China as prioritising its own interests over resolving the Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions. The increasing interest of China in the dam building in Afghanistan, especially in the Kunar River, must be examined not merely as a development project but as a calculated decision with far-

reaching consequences for the regional balance of power. The following is a detailed assessment of constraining and enabling factors in the context of a trilateral arrangement in the KRB.

CONSTRAINTS

Firstly, Chinese interests in Afghanistan are not driven by cooperative water governance but are linked to regional stability, access to untapped mineral resources, managing rivalry with India, and preventing threats along the Xinjiang border. Therefore, China's entrance into the Afghanistan theatre and particularly its hydro-development arena stems from a careful geopolitical calculation to use water, infrastructure, and connectivity as tools to enhance its strategic power. Secondly, Afghanistan views both India and China as helpful partners in its reconstruction.

Thus, the element of rivalry is likely to prevail. A critical analytical gap in existing scholarship concerns that Afghanistan might prefer Indian technical assistance over Chinese-mediated arrangements that structurally favour Pakistan. The answer lies in what might be called the 'competition of donors'. India offers historical familiarity through the legacy of the Salma Dam. Therefore, the Taliban government is unlikely to foreclose the Indian option simply because of China or Pakistan. Kabul sees multiple external partnerships as a hedge against dependence on any single actor. However, if Beijing-led dam construction projects advance through bilateral agreements directly between China and Afghanistan, and exclude Pakistan, Islamabad risks marginalisation in a basin critical for its water supply and national security.

ENABLERS

Although BRI stability, Xinjiang security, and commercial opportunity are the primary drivers of China's involvement in the region, Pakistan and China have a long history of an amicable relationship, now institutionalised in the form of CPEC. Afghanistan's inclusion in the BRI has been proposed through the extension of CPEC to Afghanistan, which makes Pakistan a significant stakeholder. Moreover, Pakistan also holds geographical leverage as currently, there is no connectivity between Afghanistan and China through the Wakhan Corridor (Zhang J. , 2023). Under China's developmental narrative, its ambitions to extend CPEC to Afghanistan, and its desire to avoid instability along its western periphery, Pakistan can

position itself as a co-stakeholder in regional water security. China's recent rapprochement efforts between Pakistan and Afghanistan present it as the only regional power well-suited to facilitate a hydropower arrangement. After a trilateral meeting held in May 2025, Pakistan and Afghanistan promoted their representatives to ambassadors as a sign of elevated diplomatic relations and agreed to extend the CPEC into Afghanistan to deepen regional connectivity (MOFA PRC, 2025). Both governments also vowed to act jointly against terrorist forces. This trilateral meeting was a significant step, indicating good prospects for neighbourly relations with Afghanistan, if not friendly. This way, China's involvement can be a positive factor. However, China's involvement is neither automatically beneficial nor straightforwardly threatening for Pakistan. The outcomes of engaging China will depend on Islamabad's ability to shape the terms of trilateral engagement. Pakistan must act swiftly to ensure that India, or any other hostile factor, does not obstruct the process of this trilateral arrangement. It requires significant political will to resolve the mutual issues of the states.

PROPOSED TRILATERAL FRAMEWORK

There are four pillars to this proposed arrangement. First, real-time hydrological data sharing is the foundational prerequisite for any governance arrangement. In the absence of agreed monitoring stations, seasonal flow data, and shared flood-forecasting protocols, no political agreement can be operationalised. Second, it must develop protocols for sediment management for proposed dam construction sites. Unmanaged sediment flows have significant consequences for Pakistan's downstream irrigation infrastructure. Third, the coordination mechanism for seasonal flows is imperative. This is critical because summer snowmelt increases flood risk in Pakistan and Afghanistan, while winter drought amplifies drought risk. Lastly, the coordination mechanism must involve a joint technical commission with representation from all three parties. The mandate of this commission should be grounded in the principles of equitable utilisation and no significant harm under the 1997 UN Convention on Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses. Though neither Pakistan nor Afghanistan is currently a party to the convention, it provides an established normative reference point. International legal norms can provide neutral frameworks precisely because they depoliticise basin management and reduce the likelihood that technical disputes will escalate into security confrontations.

CONCLUSION

The Kabul River Basin is a critical but increasingly contested transboundary water resource, which makes it a potent security issue. Applying RSCT to this context highlights that the KRB sits at the core of the South Asian regional security sub-complex, where each actor has its own strategic, developmental, and geopolitical interests. Pakistan's concerns do not derive only from Afghanistan's dam-building initiatives but also from India's growing inclination towards using Afghanistan and its water resources as a tool against Pakistan. Factors such as lack of transparency, mistrust, and the absence of institutional mechanisms for effective water governance only compound these concerns. However, China's recent interest in investing in Afghan dam and hydropower projects, particularly in the Kunar River, is a positive development for Pakistan.

Unlike India, China maintains favourable ties with both Afghanistan and Pakistan, and is seen as a potentially neutral actor capable of facilitating technical and political cooperation. However, China's involvement can only be useful if Pakistan and Afghanistan show political will to transcend zero-sum calculations and invest in institutional frameworks that prioritise shared sustainability over strategic competition. Pakistan must shift from a reactive posture to a proactive, strategy-driven approach as it has both the incentive and the strategic rationale to lead this shift. By embedding water diplomacy within broader regional engagement and leveraging China's investment in Afghanistan's hydro-infrastructure, Pakistan can help avert the securitisation of water and ensure that the Kabul River becomes a channel for cooperation rather than regional rivalries.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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