

## Securitising and de-securitising water scarcity in Pakistan: a case study of the Diامر Basha Dam

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### ABSTRACT

This study, while detailing the processes of securitisation and de-securitisation of a non-traditional security issue, deliberates on the water scarcity in Pakistan. It addresses the question that whether the problem of not giving importance to water scarcity lies with the 'intent' or 'capacity' of the actors – the elite. Or the securitisation is done by the actors 'only' to achieve their political objectives? This qualitative embedded case study deals with the rhetoric about the construction of the Diامر Basha Dam in order to address the water scarcity around the 2018 elections. The study finds that the securitisation of non-traditional security issues translates the elite's (securitising actors) political rhetoric (speech acts) into policy. The same elite de-securitises the issues after realising their political goals by removing the 'speech acts' from the equation.

**Key words:** Diامر Basha Dam, Non-traditional security, Pakistan, Securitisation, Water charter, Water scarcity

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Non-traditional security issues, such as water scarcity, are as important as traditional security issues.
- If the non-traditional security issues are not securitised, there exists a lesser chance that the public will support the state's position.
- Securitising actors' 'speech acts' are carried out, deliberated, and explained by the civil society in order to influence the 'audience'.

### INTRODUCTION

Pakistan falls within the ambit of those underprivileged states where nature has constrained unlimited access to freshwater resources thus forcing it to adopt water conservation strategies, the most important being the construction of dams and water reservoirs. Above all, its freshwater reservoirs are depleting with every passing day because of the increasing water demand, poor water management, and excessive water wastage. An example is Pakistan's agriculture sector which utilises around 95–97% of the consumed freshwater, as compared to the 3% that is used for household purposes. Out of that water, around 60% is wasted because of the poor water consumption strategies adopted by the agricultural sector in Pakistan, such as flood irrigation. Water is also wasted during the conveyance stage when it is shifted from the rivers to the fields. 'The overall efficiency [of water consumption] is generally less than 40%. For example, out of 142 billion cubic metres (BCM) of water available at the canal head works, hardly 55 BCM is being used, and remaining 87 BCM (61%) is lost during conveyance through

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canals, distributors, minors, and watercourses and during application in the field' (Imran, 2018). Besides around 29-million-acre-feet (MAF) of water is wasted every year that falls into the Arabian Sea downstream from the 'Kotri – the last structure on the Indus system for water regulation' (Kiani, 2020b). At the same time, an issue of such magnitude stands neglected at the state level – raising unprecedented alarm in electronic and social media occasionally and then vanishing from the list of priority issues either because of the lack of 'intent' or 'capacity' of the securitising actors to materialise the projects. This study through the analysis of the Diamer Basha Dam intends to explore the cycle of securitisation and de-securitisation of water politics in Pakistan's official discourse.

This study details the processes associated with securitisation as enunciated by Buzan, Weaver, and Wilde (Buzan *et al.*, 1998). The second part of the study details the water scarcity problem in Pakistan that is posing an 'existential threat' to the survival of the state. The study then details how is the discourse about water scarcity generated in Pakistan, and which are/were the actors involved in the process of securitisation. It details how an issue is presented as an 'existential threat' through careful and deliberate manipulation of available securitising tools.

The study asks two questions: How and why is the water scarcity issue first securitised and then de-securitised in Pakistan? Whether the problem of not giving importance to the water scarcity issue lies with the 'intent' or 'capacity' of the actors – the elite? Or securitisation is done by the state/state-sponsored actors only to achieve their political objectives, and once the objectives are achieved the issues are deliberately de-securitised? The study in the end offers recommendations that what steps can the state take in order to address water scarcity and keep the issue 'in' and part of the major discourses.

This qualitative research is conducted using an 'embedded case study' as a specific research method. Empirical data utilised in this study consists of the government's policy documents – National Water Policy (NWP) and Pakistan Water Charter (PWC) – and statements of the elite representing different state institutions.

### **Security, securitisation, and environment as critical security concern**

Security indeed is a slippery term employing a bewildering range of meanings and contexts to external events. The traditional state-centred-military-focused definition of security provided positivist scaffolding to the discipline bent on mapping the international order objectively and applying natural science methods to the conduct between states. The critique of this positivist approach has led to innovative theorising within the discipline which has broadened to engulf non-traditional security issues. The publication of Barry Buzan's *People, States and Fear* (Buzan, 1983) in 1983 heralded a major shift in the academic debate by seeking to develop a broader analytical framework for the study of security. *Security: A New Framework of Analysis* by Buzan, Weaver, and Wilde in 1998 furthered the horizons of security studies (Buzan *et al.*, 1998). One critical aspect of Buzan's expansive conception of security is the referent object, that is, 'Who or what is being secured?'. By qualifying 'the state' as the 'primary referent object' Buzan argues how its security is prior to the candidates that depend on it.

Security is about the absence of threat and securitisation in International Relations is a process through which any issue can be presented as a security issue – or securitised – if it is represented as posing an 'existential threat' to the actor/s and the audience. The securitisation process, thus, is dependent upon three factors: 'the referent object,' something that needs to be securitised; second, the 'audience' that the actors intend to convince; and third the speech acts through which the actors convince the audience about the existential threat – thus demanding immediate and maximum attention of the actors (Buzan *et al.*, 1998). 'Speech acts' are the words utilised by the securitising actors to convince the audience about the gravity of the situation. These acts not only detail the facts but also are used to construct the facts about the securitised issue. There, thus, exists a symbiotic relationship between the actors, the audience, and the issue to be securitised.

Buzan delineates the critical distinction between strong and weak states on the basis of the state-level condition for security. From this concept of strong states within the ‘mature anarchy’<sup>1</sup> emerges his analysis for implications and policy prescriptions that place the state-actor in opposition to the regional structure. In the entire process, Buzan never overlooks the individual level, who to him represents ‘the irreducible basic unit to which the concept of security must be applied’ (Buzan, 1991, p. 35). By thus stating he distinguishes himself from the dominant realist traditions which refer state as the irreducible unit of analysis.

‘Security is primarily about the fate of human collectivities....’ (Buzan, 1991, p. 19). Security is affected by factors in five major sectors. These sectors represent now familiar ‘broad concepts’ of security, that is, security within the *political, military, economic, societal, and environmental* domains, each signifying their respective area of vulnerability. It can be conveniently argued, none of these sectors – traditional and non-traditional combined – are objects of security in their own right rather their role is to demarcate the zones where state vulnerability might be at stake. By recognising the multi-dimensional threat to security other than the military, Buzan indeed has widened the scope of the security *policy* as he asserts: the potential objects of security multiply ‘as one moves down through the state level to the level of individuals, and up beyond it to the level of the international system as a whole. Since the security of any one referent object or level cannot be achieved in isolation from the others, the security of each becomes, in part, a condition for the security of all’ (Buzan, 1991, p. 26). It can thus be deduced that the security of the people and the state are relational and a necessary condition for establishing security for all. But it should not be ignored that for Buzan, at any level absence of threat to the state is the necessary prerequisite for the state to be secure unconditionally. A movement from a weak to a strong position on the domestic axis and from an immature to a mature mark in the regional reference group can only enable the state to achieve its security.

One marked achievement of the entire security broadening thesis has been the attention paid to the environmental domain which hitherto had been side-lined in spite of being labelled as ‘ultimate security’ (Myers, 1993) by some in the academic field. Attempts to securitise environmental values has a relatively short history which up till now have registered themselves in the form of either epistemic communities, or environmental discourse from social movements, governmental departments, and international organisations.

By demarcating the boundary lines between a scientific agenda and a political agenda which do overlap and shape each other in the environmental sector, Buzan *et al.* highlight how the former is primarily shaped by (natural) sciences and non-governmental activity (Buzan *et al.*, 1998). Existing outside the domain of core power politics, it is mainly constructed by scientists and research institutions and provides insight for the environmental problems threatening the evolution of present civilisation. The political agenda is shaped by governmental and intergovernmental institutions addressing public decision-making processes and formulating public policies to deal with environmental concerns. Political agenda as such reflects the overall degree of politicisation and securitisation, though both overlap in media and public debates (Buzan *et al.*, 1998, pp. 71–72). Buzan notes,

*‘The scientific agenda is about the authoritative assessment of threat for securitizing or desecuritizing moves, whereas the political agenda deals with the formation of concern in the public sphere about these moves and the allocation of collective means by which to deal with the issues raised’* (Buzan *et al.*, 1998, p. 72).

<sup>1</sup> Buzan’s concept of ‘mature anarchy’ emerges within the framework of ‘regional security complex’ where the concept of strong state has implication for both domestic and regional environment. Domestically, socio-political strength and cohesion provides strength against fundamental internal conflicts while linking of strong states in regional configuration transform the region into ‘mature anarchy’ thus preventing slide of international system to the chaotic end of the anarchy spectrum.

The two agendas might overlap but they still follow different cycles. While scientific agenda must meet academic standards, political agenda is shaped by media, government and public standards chiefly focused on short-term objectives as well as implications. 'Critical for the political agenda is not whether specific threats to the environment are real or speculative but whether their *presumed urgency* is a political issue' (Buzan *et al.*, 1998, p. 73) or not. As most of the securitising moves for the environmental issues are dominated by immediate threats to the surrounding, they not only address the more sensational, emotional manifestation of the concerned issues but also become part of ordinary politics. The political parties taking advantage of the situation formulate policies thus contributing to the politicisation of the issue rather than its securitisation. Their ultimate objective remains to achieve political objectives by denigrating the opponent political actors for not taking up the issues.

Hence, disagreement over priorities is bound to exist within scientific and political agendas and they tend to focus on debates surrounding what type of concerns have to be politicised and what issues are deemed to be labelled as 'existential threats' to demand extraordinary investment to turn the tides – implying securitisation.

One may include the disruption of ecosystems to energy, population, food, and economic problems, to war-related environmental degradation concerns as part of the environmental threat vulnerability agenda. However, the risk of losing achieved levels of civilisation has been referred to as the ultimate referent object of environmental security. The threat as such is not only to the environment itself but to the nexus of civilisation and environment. Hence a great degree of controversy is involved because along with the securitising actors exist actors who oppose it by undermining or contesting the attempts to prioritise it as a threat. Paucity of resources and triumph of political over scientific agenda in economically constrained environments usually lead to neglect of environmental concerns, which only get revived when political concerns call for rebranding of the issue on the political stage.

Besides climate change, any specific project stemming from the larger environmental concern can easily fall into disarray if the empirical research is not conducted by taking into account local, regional, and global dynamics. The successful securitising move of an issue thus has to answer a sequence of questions. (1) What does the disaster scenario look like, its manifestation in time and space and how is it expected to be politicised and securitised? (2) Who are the adversaries with counter moves, and who are potential and lead actors? (3) Is there a structural issue linkage and how is it linked to the political agenda? Analysis of water politics in Pakistan, with special emphasis on the Diamer Basha Dam, will help us explore how the water scarcity problem – as part of the environmental security – has been politicised, securitised, and then de-securitised over decades more as a part of political agenda rather than concerns emanating from informed scientific assessments.

Here, in the study of the Diamer Basha Dam, the state is the referent object which has to be securitised by convincing the audience that is, the general public, that acute water shortage will befall Pakistan if a timely aggressive approach is not employed by the governing elite plus the institutional machinery and 'speech acts' is the tools employed and the methods used to make securitisation discourse visible.

Before moving on to the detailed analysis of the issue under discussion, however, it has to be acknowledged that the securitisation of water politics in Pakistan, especially the case of the Diamer Basha Dam is neither the first nor the last debate on the securitisation of hydro-politics of South Asia or the global securitisation discourse. Whether it is the Indus Water Treaty (IWT) between the arch-rivals Pakistan and India or the water projects on the Pak–Afghan border sponsored by India or even the case of Bangladesh and Nepal, a bulk of literature already exists that explores water-related problems of the South Asian states within the paradigm of securitisation – 'existential' threat to respective states, their national security or survival. This literature apart from situating the water scarcity problem in usual securitisation discourse explores avenues for transboundary cooperation to mitigate the disastrous effects of seasonal variations in monsoon along with devastations brought on by global warming and climate change. But for the sake of brevity, this article aims to add to the existing

literature by elaborating the example of the Diamer Basha Dam only which created much public outcry in Pakistani media throughout the year 2018 before disappearing from public discourse.

## **Water scarcity issue in Pakistan as part of the non-traditional security**

### **Pakistan: from a water-abundant states to water-scarce states**

Apart from its usage for irrigation and domestic purposes, water has become an important component of industrial growth. Unfortunately for Pakistan, the leap from 'water-abundant' to 'water-stressed' mark occurred within a few decades according to a 2006 report by Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI). Although the report identifies water management that includes water stress, poor water quality, and inequitable access to water at the core of the country's water crisis rather than its unavailability, nonetheless, Pakistan is predicted to be 'water-scarce' by 2025 (Shehzad & Astrid, 2006). "Water stress" refers to a condition where a country's annual availability of renewable freshwater resources is less than 1,667 m<sup>3</sup> and more than 1,000 m<sup>3</sup> per person per year in the population and "Water scarcity" denotes countries where annual availability of renewable freshwater resources is less than 1,000 m<sup>3</sup> per person in the population' (Engelman & LeRoy, 1993). Similarly, the United Nations denotes that if the water level goes below 500 m<sup>3</sup> per person, then the country is considered to face 'absolute water scarcity' (UNDESA, 2012). Water scarcity has been defined by the United Nations as 'the point at which the aggregate impact of all users impinges on the supply or quality of water under prevailing institutional arrangements to the extent that the demand by all sectors, including the environment, cannot be satisfied fully' (UNDESA, 2012). Based on the criteria given above, Pakistan's per capita water availability of around 1,038 m<sup>3</sup> in 2021, from 1947 levels of 5,600 m<sup>3</sup> shows a massive decline of 400%, according to Dr Nausheen Hamid, Parliamentary Secretary National Health Services (Dr Nausheen Hamid quoted by Ali, 2021). This also highlights another worrying fact, that is, Pakistan was expected to reach the water scarcity level in 2025 – as per the 2006 SDPI report – but it reached that level somewhere in the late 2010s. Now it is expected that Pakistan may touch the 'absolute water scarcity' level by 2025 – something that presents a really disturbing and alarming picture of the state of affairs.

Water–food–environment security nexus is evident from a study of the Indus River basin water supplies, which disclosed the gravity of the situation as 90% of Pakistan's food production depends on it. Water scarcity in 2025 is linked with 70 million tons shortage of food supplies because of water shortfall. A rapidly growing population is further aggravating the scenario as demands for food cannot be fulfilled owing to the absence of new supplies of water. This in turn is creating additional challenges for food and nutrition security.

### **Water as source of intra- and inter-state conflicts**

The inclusion of environmental degradation and resource depletion as a threat to social, economic, and political stability in the new security discourse worldwide has added water-security nexus to the environmental issues. In Pakistan water scarcity and its detrimental implications for climate, economic, and political stability have generated requisite debate, unfortunately with far less follow up in the last few decades. Traditionally water management has been treated as a local matter requiring local solutions. Now it has broadened to engulf the entire globe by generating refugee crisis and regional conflicts besides increased dependency on imported food and increased demand for foreign aid.

Water-related conflicts, in fact, have pre-dated the South Asian sub-continent's partition<sup>2</sup>. The first conflict occurred among the Western Indian states (now constituting Pakistan), that is, Punjab, Sindh, Bahawalpur,

<sup>2</sup> Formation of various commissions and committees in the pre-partition period testify this fact. These include: The Tripartite Agreement (1921), The Indus Discharge Committee (1921), Sutlej Valley Project Inquiry Committee (1932), Andersen Committee (1935), and Rao Commission 1945.

and Bikaner in the post-World War I period over the water sharing mechanism of the Indus River. Upper riparian Punjab demanded more water share on the basis of its overall contribution to the economy, while the lower riparian Sindh kept insisting about its growing needs (Memon, 2002). The first conflict was resolved by the British government's negotiations between the conflicting parties. It, however, resurfaced after the partition between India and Pakistan at both the inter-state and intra-state levels. The IWT of 1960 between the two states somehow subdued the war-threatening discourse over water disputes at the inter-state level (Kalair *et al.*, 2019). As a result of the Treaty, the loss of three major water tributaries (Sutlej, Bias, and Ravi) gave rise to intra-state conflict in Pakistan, owing to the imbalance in demand and supply of water. It gave rise to serious implications for the federal structure of the state also.

For a very long period of time, this shortage of available water and its long-term repercussions have been under discussion in the government, public and private circles. Repeated reports and committees have pointed towards the urgency of the situation demanding 'emergency' constructions of new water reserves and adopting 'best' water management strategies, to avoid looming disasters such as hunger and famine. One such example is the report by the Technical Committee on Water Resources (TCWR), appointed by the President of Pakistan in 2003 to 'examine contentious water issues' and 'discuss matters relating to water management and distribution, construction of future reservoirs and irrigation schemes, water availability, outflow to sea, etc' (Abbasi, 2005). The committee submitted its report in 2005. Also known as AGN Abbasi Report, it took stock of the situation and offered several recommendations that were later on utilised by successive governments to justify their position on building or not building water reservoirs, the dams. But still, the government failed to build a consensus about building the new dams. The report and the talk of constructing the new dams especially the contentious Kalabagh Dam created a huge hue and cry in Sindh. Activists often raised the slogans such as '*Musharraf wahiz kar ailaan, dam khapaye ya Pakistan*' ('Musharraf: come clear, what you need dam or Pakistan') (Rajpar, 2018). If the objective scientific tools and technical expertise failed to resolve differences among conflicting parties, subjective analysis of provincial identity, relative sense of deprivation, mutual distrust, and lack of harmony among federating units have further complicated the discourse on water politics.

Besides, it needs to emphasise that Pakistan under the stern clutches of authoritarian regimes and the civil-military bureaucracy for most of its history has favoured an over-centralised system. This furthered the inter-provincial and centre-province distrust that is reflected in matters concerning water management and the construction of new reservoirs, where small units feel being marginalised to serve the interests of the larger units. Contentious politics surrounding the construction of the Kalabagh Dam is a case in point. This lack of trust and a prevailing sense of deprivation can be cited as one of the major impediments to finding a viable solution to water issues, acceptable to all units in Pakistan. Reports of various commissions and committees from 1968 to 1991 failed to develop a consensus of all four provinces until the breakthrough was achieved by the historic approval of the Water Apportionment Accord of 1991 by the federal government (IRSA, 1991; Anwar & Bhatti, 2018). Subsequent history revealed that even its operational part is rendered inefficient by controversies and disagreements, forcing Pakistan into a zone of 'water-stressed' and 'water-scarce' countries.

All this has contributed to the framing of water scarcity as an 'existential threat' in national discourse demanding immediate attention and redressing of the issue by governmental and non-governmental institutions.

### **Diamer Basha Dam and the securitisation processes**

International Monetary Fund (IMF) ranks Pakistan on the third position among the states that are facing severe water shortage (Ahmed, 2021). This and other reports also warn that by 2025 Pakistan will become a state having 'absolute water scarcity' implying 'no person in Pakistan, whether from the north with its more than 5,000 glaciers or from the south with its 'hyper deserts,' will be immune to this [scarcity]' (Ahmed, 2021).

Pakistan's freshwater reservoirs are depleting with every passing day because of the increasing water demand, poor water management, and excessive water wastage. Above all intra-state and inter-state conflicts have further exacerbated the situation. Most of Pakistan's freshwater rivers originate from territories that are not in its control. India holds control over the tributaries of the Indus River, mostly originating from Jammu and Kashmir – the erstwhile nuclear flashpoint between Pakistan and India. Similarly, Afghanistan can stop around 21 MAF of water flowing through the Kabul River, which makes up about 16% of the water flowing in the Indus River system (Kakakhel, 2018). Besides, Pakistan claims that India – in violation of the IWT – is developing several hydro-power projects upstream. Indian Prime Minister Modi's statement that 'blood and water cannot flow together' (Modi, 2016) created further urgency in Pakistan to address the issue of water scarcity. Water, thus, remained no more an environmental concern, but rather became an issue that has the capacity to bring the two nuclear-armed states face to face with each other. India has also remained actively engaged in pushing and funding the last regime of Afghanistan to build dams on the Kabul River, so as to prevent the flow of water to Pakistan, whenever required (Hessami, 2018; Ramachandran, 2018). At the intra-state level, the issue of building big dams has been politicised resulting in inter-provincial discord. One such example is the construction of the Kalabagh Dam, which could not be materialised because of the inter-provincial differences. The province of Sindh specifically has had reservations about building dams on the Indus River. It has been claimed that Sindh, being lying at the low stream of the Indus delta will see a cut in the flow of water if dams are built upstream. People living on the coastal belt specifically will be affected by the less flow of water (Akhtar, 2018). These intra- and inter-state issues have provided an impetus to Pakistan's politico-security elite to securitise the water scarcity. Politicisation and then securitisation of the water scarcity issue was done successfully to such an extent that the people of Sindh who have traditionally opposed the construction of dams upstream have started supporting the construction of Diamer Basha dam – 'maybe because people are fearful of the country's impending "absolute water scarcity"' (Akhtar, 2018).

*Conditions of securitisation:* The situation, thus, remained ripe for successful securitisation, because it fulfilled its three criteria, that is:

- The situation is disastrous having both intra- and inter-state implications.
- Adversaries are clear. India, whose prime minister has clearly warned that water flowing to Pakistan will be stopped, thus providing impetus as well as a rationale to the lead actors in the state to securitise the issue. Domestically the rampant water shortages in urban centres like Karachi forced even the people of Sindh to become part of the process and support the actions taken by the state to address the securitised issue.
- And finally, securitisation of the issue helped actors involved in the process to attain their political objectives. It is evident from the fact that the water scarcity issue, which should have remained the topmost priority of the state through most of its history, surfaces only near the elections and is usually downgraded in the policy priorities after the elections are over. So, the issue is securitised by the actors for attaining their political objective, in this case maligning the sitting government by highlighting the inaction on its part to address the crisis. The issue is also securitised by the sitting governments in order to earn credit for doing something that the previous governments could not do.

## Indicators of securitisation in Pakistan

### Indicator 1 of securitisation: supreme court's intervention

An indicator of the securitisation process around the election time remains the actions by the CJP Mr Saqib Nisar. He helped securitise the issue by taking a *Suo Moto* notice of the water shortage on June 4, 2018, *around 1 month before the elections*. This furthered the cause of securitising the issue. CJP noted that 'What have we done for our

children if we can't even provide them water?' (Bhatti, 2018). In July 2018, the month of the general elections, Pakistan established the Diamer Basha and Mohmad Dam Fund under the direction of CJ Nisar. He himself took interest in the crowd-funding campaign for the dams (*Diamer Bhasha Dam Project, Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan*, 2019). He informed a gathering in December 2018 that he thought of launching the campaign to build the Diamer Basha dam after looking at the water scarcity situation in Quetta and Karachi (Nisar, 2018). Civil society organisations furthered the securitisation process by launching awareness campaigns and running hashtags on Twitter and other social media platforms.

### Indicator 2: Pakistan Water Charter

Another indicator of this securitisation effort on the part of the government remains the introduction of the Pakistan Water Charter (PWC) by the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) [PML(N)] government *weeks before the general election* in 2018. That again could have been a response to the campaign launched by the main opposition political party – Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI). Chaudhary Sarwar of PTI (Governor Punjab under PTI government) accused the PML-N government of showing lethargic behaviour in highlighting the issue of India developing dams on the River Neelum that will deprive Pakistan of around 10% of its share of the water in future (Sarwar, 2018).

2018, the year of the election, was also the year that saw the securitisation of water scarcity done by several actors lying at several layers of society. In April 2018, government passed the Water Charter signed by the four Chief Ministers and the Prime Minister. Such was the level of the securitisation of the water scarcity at that time that the charter was signed by five persons belonging to different and at times antithetical political parties who were vying for the votes of the upcoming elections.

- Murad Ali Shah of Sindh belonging to the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) – opposition.
- Abdul Quddus Bizengo of Balochistan belonging to Pakistan Muslim League (Q) – opposition.
- Pervez Khattak of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa belonging to PTI – opposition.
- Shahbaz Shareef of Punjab belonging to the PML (N) – government.
- and Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi of the PML (N) – government.

The Charter declared 'a *water emergency* (emphasis original)' (Abbasi *et al.*, 2018) in the state. It further notes that 'We must now look beyond our differences and come together as a nation to rise to the challenge that is before us' (Abbasi *et al.*, 2018). While taking stock of the water scarcity it highlighted that the issue is causing water, food, and energy insecurities. 'Our per capita availability of water, which was above 5,200 m<sup>3</sup> at the time of independence, has now dropped below the minimum threshold of 1,000 m<sup>3</sup> per head, officially making us a water-scarce country' (Abbasi *et al.*, 2018). Important aspect for the securitisation process remained the language of the Charter which declared water scarcity as an 'existential threat' (Abbasi *et al.*, 2018) to the nation, demanding actors belonging to any and all streams of the society to continue developing water reservoirs, irrespective of who is in power (Abbasi *et al.*, 2018). Securitisation of the water scarcity was thus complete because now every section of society, belonging to any ethnicity or political party, was in favour of the construction of the dams – something that was missing since the 1960s and 1970s in Pakistan.

### Indicator 3: National Water Policy

Along with the Water Charter in April 2018, Pakistan's first-ever National Water Policy (NWP) was also passed by the Council of Common Interest (CCI) – again weeks before the general elections (Kiani, 2018; Reporter,



2018)<sup>3</sup>. The policy specifically took stock of the current water storage capacity which remains at 14 MAF and declared to increase it to 24 MAF through the construction of small and large dams. It declared to immediately start the work on the construction of the Diamer Basha dam which has already been approved by the CCI in 2009 and will be having a water storage capacity of 6.4 MAF (Ministry of Water Resources, 2018). It also declared to rehabilitate the existing water infrastructures by addressing the issue of excessive groundwater utilisation, water wastage in the agriculture sector, trying to reduce other users' demands, and enhancing provincial and federal capacities of the water management (Kakakhel, 2018). It further declares that the water losses in the state would be reduced by 33% from 46 MAF till 2030 by lining the canals and other watercourses. Water will also be preserved by increasing efficiency in the agricultural sector through the introduction of drip and sprinkler irrigation techniques (Ministry of Water Resources, 2018).

#### Indicator 4: Diamer Basha Dam

The most important part of the NWP remains its plans for the construction of several small and big water reservoirs – specifically Diamer Basha and Mohmad Dams – in order to address the 'agriculture-food-water nexus' (Kakakhel, 2018; GoP, 2021). Diamer Basha is the largest-ever dam project launched in Pakistan (Figure 1). With a height of 272 m, this will also be one of the tallest dams in the world. It is being built on the Indus River in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan, around 315 km upstream from Tarbela dam and 40 km downstream from Chilas town (Diamer Bhasha Dam Project, Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan, 2019)<sup>4</sup>. Its reservoir is expected to have a 'gross storage capacity of 8.1 MAF of water' (Mustafa, 2020) with a power generation capacity of 4.5 GW (Kiani, 2020a).

The project is expected to complete by 2029. Gathering funds for the dam remained a problem, which initially was resolved by China's commitments who wanted to make it a part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Diamer Bhasha Dam Project, Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan, 2019). Pakistan's government withdrew the project from the CPEC because of the stringent Chinese monetary conditions and its wish of taking full ownership of the project. Moreover, World Bank (WB) and the Asian Development Bank refused to fund the project because of the Indian campaign about the project being developed in a disputed territory (Diamer Bhasha Dam Project, Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan, 2019). Pakistan ultimately decided to arrange funding for the project availing indigenous sources. In May 2020, it signed a contract with a consortium consisting of the Field Works Organisation (FWO) of Pakistan and China Power for the construction of parts of the dam, a contract valuing PKR442 Billion.

#### De-securitisation of the issue

Elections in Pakistan were held in July 2018. Imran Khan-led PTI won the elections and PML-N was ousted from the centre. The urgency created by several actors before the elections led to the securitisation of the water scarcity prompting the state to pursue the construction of the Diamer Basha Dam on a priority basis. With the retirement of Chief Justice Nisar and the election win of PTI who formed government in the centre, the process of de-securitisation started. The debates about water scarcity started to vanish from media discourse. CJP's dam fund which

<sup>3</sup> However, hours after signing the policy, three Chief Ministers of the provinces walked out of the National Economic Council (NEC)'s meeting over the issue of including the annual provincial development programmes in the meeting – a problem that emerged between centre and the units after the eighteenth constitutional amendment.

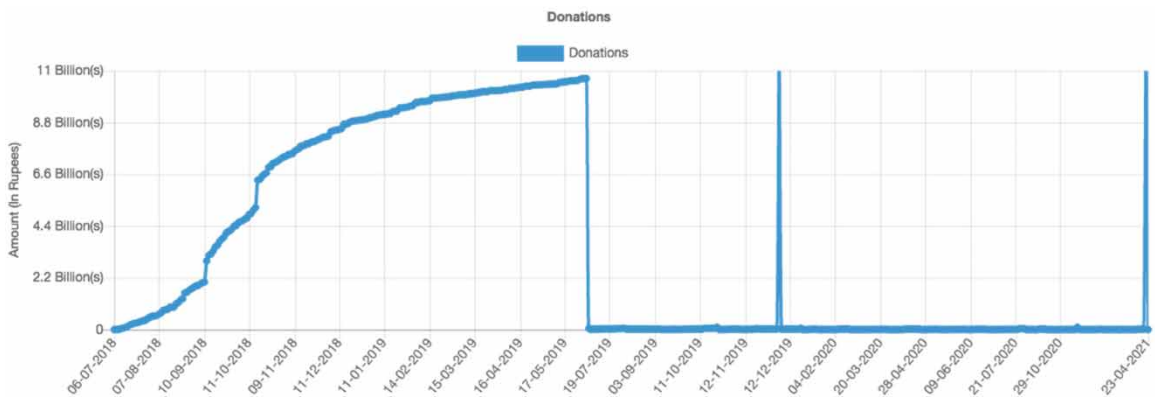
<sup>4</sup> Diamer Bhasha will be a roller compacted concrete (RCC) gravity dam with a crest length exceeding 1 km and a maximum height of 272 m. The reservoir created by the dam will impound up to 7,500,000 acre-feet of water accounting for approximately 15% of the annual river flow. The gross storage capacity of the reservoir will be 10 billion cubic metres (BCM), of which 7.9 BCM will be the live storage capacity. Spillways of the dam will comprise of 14 radial gates, each measuring 16.25 m-high and 11.5 m-wide. The maximum water discharge capacity of each gate will be 18,128 m<sup>3</sup>/s.



**Fig. 1** | Location of the Diamer Basha Dam. *Source: Rehman et al. (2019).*

was attracting billions of rupees of donations immediately stopped receiving anything (as is depicted in Figure 2) (Editorial, 2019).

It is also important to note that the PTI-led government after winning the elections gave very little attention to the issue. Rarely any official of the government raised or discussed the issue in the media. Moreover, NWP 2018 constituted a National Water Council consisting of the Prime Minister (Chairman), Federal Ministers for Water



**Fig. 2** | Situation of the donations for the Diamer Basha Dam. *Source: Dam Fund Statistics (2021).*

Resources, Power, Finance, Planning, four Chief Ministers of the provinces, and five private sector members related to water, with Secretary of Ministry of Water Resources as its Secretary (Ministry of Water Resources, 2018). It was declared that the Council shall meet every year to review the progress on water-related projects and devise new strategies for the future. Though NWP was devised by the PML-N government under the Prime Ministership of Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, it was Prime Minister Imran Khan of the PTI who first held the meeting of the Council in October 2018 (National Water Council, 2018). Since then, not even a single meeting of the Council has been held that confirms that the issue has been de-prioritised and de-securitised.

## FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Water scarcity was successfully securitised by two successive governments around the 2018 general elections period. Actors involved in the securitising process remained both at societal and state levels. They created an urgency about the issue thus ensuring that the provinces which usually held reservations about the construction of the new dams on the Indus River and its tributaries consented to the new megaprojects. Construction of the Diamer Basha dam was specifically securitised by the efforts of the CJP Saqib Nisar who launched a crowd-funding campaign. Though the campaign was destined to gather funds for the construction of the dam, it did more than that – it raised awareness among the general population about the urgency of the issue. The situation was such that even the poor sections of the society contributed to the dam fund by sending merely PKR 10 through their mobile devices, sending an SMS – cellular companies thus collected the donations through this simple method and submitted them to the Dam Fund. Different institutions of the states contributed to the fund by offering part of their salaries. Everyone in the electronic and social media was talking about the water scarcity issues and the construction of the Diamer Basha dam. Donation-gathering events were organised throughout Pakistan and worldwide.

The retirement of the CJP and the election of PTI in the centre resulted in de-securitising the issue. Water scarcity being a part of the non-traditional security got de-prioritised and several other traditional issues attained top priority in the policy processes. With it, the general public also lost interest in the project, and inflow of the donations for the fund literally decimated to zero. The loss of interest by the political elite in the securitisation process put the issue in the hands of the second and third tiers of the bureaucratic elite. The new Minister of Water Resources Moonis Elahi remained very active on social media and highlighted the issue of water scarcity by noting that at present we have the capacity to store only 30 days of water in Pakistan (Elahi, 2021a, 2021b)<sup>5</sup>. On May 19, 2021, he tweeted ‘Extremely alarming! Only 7 to 8 days of water remained in dams across the country. Those who criticise the Kala Bagh Dam in the blind imitation of the enemy, now open your eyes. Think of your future generations if not yours. Build Kala Bagh Dam, save the country!’ (Elahi, 2021a). Elahi’s statement, whose family hailed from Punjab, tells us of the insensitivities attached to the issue of water scarcity. Securitisation of the issues requires that the securitising actors ensure that every stakeholder should feel that, by not taking action, their survival remains at stake. Highlighting the divisive issues, such as the Kalabagh dam opposed by three provinces, creates resentment in the community, thus putting even ongoing projects at stake.

Prime Minister Khan visited the Diamer Basha dam site in July 2020 and declared it a ‘window of development and opportunities for the people of Gilgit-Baltistan’ (WAPDA, 2020). In a similar vein chairman Pakistan Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) noted that the Diamer Basha Dam is a ‘game changer’ for the local

<sup>5</sup> He noted on another occasion that ‘Pakistan is facing a severe water crisis. In this ordeal, there is a need to adopt common national priorities, not political allegations and provincial differences. We need to build huge reservoirs on a war footing and save every Pakistani drop by drop of water. Because in this saving we are all safe. #SaveWaterSaveLife.’

people (APP, 2021). Though they were addressing the concerns of the local population, it tells us that any delay in the operationalisation of such infrastructure projects leads to negative politicisation of the issue, both by the domestic and foreign actors.

The findings of the study are:

- Non-traditional security issues, such as water scarcity, are as important as traditional security issues. In some circumstances, non-traditional security issues, if left unaddressed, have more devastating consequences for the state and society, as compared to traditional threats.
- If the non-traditional security issues are not securitised, there exist lesser chances that the public will support the state's position.
- State and government elites are not the only actors involved in the securitisation process. Civil society groups play an important role in the securitisation process. Securitising actors' 'speech acts' are carried out, deliberated, and explained by civil society in order to influence the 'audience'.
- The chances of securitisation of non-traditional security issues, such as water scarcity, are enhanced tremendously if the stakes of political actors are involved. The ultimate objective of the political actors remains to attract the voters, influence the public, and ensure their political survival. This is the reason such issues are specifically securitised whenever election season is nearby.
- Once the political objectives are achieved by the elite, issues are de-securitised because of the lack of intent and capacity – in technical and monetary terms. The intent remains an important reason for the state elite to continue to securitise the issues, such as water scarcity, and also to de-securitise them. This de-securitisation is done by actors through removing the 'speech acts' from the securitisation process.
- External actors and factors, on the one hand, provide an opportunity to the state elite to securitise the issues by 'rallying around the flag effect', and on the other hand can create problems for the state, especially when the issue is de-securitised.

The study concludes that building dams – though necessary and an important part of the process – is not the only solution to deal with the problem of water scarcity. Adopting effective water management strategies and preventing water wastage are the other means through which the water scarcity issue can be addressed. State and civil society need to securitise these issues for the longer term so as to ensure that water resources are managed effectively because nothing is unlimited. Even if big and small dams are constructed, still effective water management strategies are a must to ensure a steady supply of water. The government of the province of Punjab started the 'more crop per drop' project with the help of the WB (Mukhtar, 2020), which remains an appreciable step in the right direction. Such an approach is required in other provinces and at the state level in Pakistan.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors are thankful to the Hanns Seidel Foundation Pakistan (<https://pakistan.hss.de/>) for the support to conduct this research.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All relevant data are included in the paper or its Supplementary Information.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare there is no conflict.

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First received 16 April 2022; accepted in revised form 11 December 2022. Available online 26 December 2022