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Travel Grant Paper Abstract

The water wars thesis promulgated by popular media and primary literature predicts an escalating response to water scarcity in which anxiety over transboundary water resources leads to conflict and ultimately culminates in violence, but there is little empirical support for this theory. To date, only one war has been fought over water, and it occurred 4500 years ago. To explain the disparity between theory and reality, it is now widely recognized that countries preferentially seek peaceful resolution through measures such as legal agreements and food imports. However, such mechanisms do not wholly resolve or prevent water conflicts, and may in fact obscure them

The Ganges River directly impacts the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people and has been a focal point of Indo-Bangladeshi relations since Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan in 1971. After twenty-five years of stymied negotiations, India and Bangladesh brokered a long-term agreement over the shared management and equitable distribution of the Ganges. The paper evaluates the prevailing response to the water wars thesis through an interdisciplinary analysis of the efficacy of the Ganges Water Treaty. Despite this landmark agreement, the paper finds that a palpable sense of conflict persists in Bangladesh and is evident in news articles, academic literature, and individuals' attitudes. The paper shows that reconciliation following an international conflict has been supplanted by internalized conflict and questions the conventional wisdom that treaties resolve international water conflicts.