GEOPOLITICS

A PAKISTANI MINISTER IN DELHI, AND NO CHANGE ON THE INDUS WATERS TREATY

By **Kamlesh Bhagatkar**, *Politician, Author & Geopolitical Analyst · 21 November 2026*

Pakistan's Climate Change Minister, Musadik Masood Malik, landed in New Delhi on Friday, 20 November, to lead his country's delegation at the first SCO Civilisational Dialogue Forum. News24 reported that his visit is the first by a Pakistani minister to India in three years. The same day, the Ministry of External Affairs was asked about the Indus Waters Treaty, and spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal gave a short answer. "As far as the IWT is concerned, we have made our position very clear, and that is where it remains," he said, according to Daily Jagran. "There is absolutely no change." Oneindia reported his words as "No change whatsoever."

The two outlets differ on the wording, but the message is identical. India will host Pakistan at a multilateral meeting in its capital. It will not reopen the treaty while that meeting is on.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi opened the forum at Purana Qila on Friday. It runs until 22 November. The Week reported that he proposed the forum at the 2025 SCO Summit in China, and that the Bishkek Declaration of the SCO heads of state welcomed it in September. Culture Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat had said on 13 November that 15 countries had confirmed participation, according to All India Radio.

Where the treaty stands

The Indus Waters Treaty was brokered by the World Bank in 1960. It gave India the eastern rivers (Ravi, Beas and Sutlej) and Pakistan the western rivers (Indus, Jhelum and Chenab). After the Pahalgam attack of 22 April 2025, in which 26 people were killed, India put the treaty in abeyance with immediate effect. The condition was set out then, and the Jal Shakti Ministry repeated it in May 2025: the treaty stays in abeyance "until Pakistan credibly and irrevocably abjures its support for cross-border terrorism."

I see nothing in the past eighteen months to suggest that condition has been met. Pakistan, meanwhile, has taken its case abroad. At the UN Security Council on 18 November, Pakistan's Deputy Permanent Representative Usman Jadoon accused India of weaponising water, Organiser reported, and First Secretary Ansar Shah called India's stand "outlaw behaviour" that threatened the water of more than 240

million Pakistanis. India's Permanent Representative, Ambassador Harish Parvathaneni, replied that "Our position on the Indus Waters Treaty remains consistent and clear and has been articulated at multiple forums."

So within three days, Pakistan raised the treaty in New York, and its minister arrived in Delhi with the same treaty hanging over his visit.

The minister and his words

Reporters in Delhi wanted to know about Malik's earlier remarks. Oneindia reported that in June he said Pakistan would "cut off that hand" that tries to take its share of water, and that he accused India of using water as a means of pressure. On Friday he was more careful. Asked about cross-border terrorism, he said: "I think tomorrow, once I give my statement, we'll have a lot of conversations." He also said, according to News24, "I think all of our relationships will improve." Oneindia reported that he called for a transparent, evidence-based mechanism to address terrorism concerns on both sides, and said the SCO should not be confined to India-Pakistan issues.

I agree with him on that last point, though perhaps not in the way he meant it. The SCO forum is about manuscripts, music, architecture and philosophy. Modi used his speech to propose that SCO countries digitise and translate ancient manuscripts, with AI to speed up translation, and suggested joint museum exhibitions and heritage circuits, the Tribune reported. "Mutual trust is the most essential element for fostering harmony," he said. That line was spoken to the whole room, but it applies with special force to one guest.

Why India is right to keep the two tracks apart

I read the government's approach as a clear separation of duties. As host of an SCO event, India invites every member, Pakistan included. That is what a responsible host does, and it costs us nothing. A bilateral concession is a different matter. It has to be earned, and the price was named in April 2025.

Pakistan's diplomats say India is using water as a weapon. The sequence of events matters here: India put the treaty in abeyance only after 26 people were killed in Baisaran meadow. The condition for restoring the treaty is in Pakistan's own hands. It does not ask Pakistan to give up a single drop of water. It asks Pakistan to stop supporting cross-border terrorism, credibly and irrevocably.

I have written before about what Operation Sindoor changed for India: terror now carries a cost. The treaty is part of that cost. Softening it because a minister has come to a culture forum would tell Pakistan that a photo opportunity can buy back what an attack lost. Jaiswal's two sentences on Friday made sure that message was not sent.

There is also a lesson for our own diplomacy. A hard line on the treaty works best when India looks confident and open everywhere else. Hosting delegations from 15 confirmed countries at Purana Qila, talking about shared heritage from Central Asia to Cambodia, is the opposite of isolation. Pakistan is a

participant in that room. It is not its centre.

What to watch

Malik promised to say more after his statement at the forum on Saturday, 21 November. Three things are worth watching. First, whether he raises the Indus Waters Treaty from the SCO stage, which would turn a cultural forum into a political platform. Second, whether any request for a bilateral meeting is made, and how New Delhi answers it. Third, whether Pakistan takes the water issue back to the Security Council in the coming weeks, as it did on 18 November.

On the Indian side, the position is now on record twice in one week, at the Security Council on Wednesday and at the MEA briefing on Friday.

Sources

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