



CHMUN 2026

**UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY –
LEGAL**

AGENDA

*Addressing the Legal Status and Continuity of Bilateral Treaties in Times of
Conflict: Examining the 2026 Dispute over the Indus Waters Treaty and the Limits
of Unilateral Treaty Suspension, International Jurisdiction and State Sovereignty*

Executive Board:

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Letter from the Executive Board

Dear delegates,

There is a certain kind of committee you prepare for. And then there is a committee that builds you upon understanding diplomacy.

We hope this is the latter.

A good committee in our perception – is impossible to be measured in quality speeches, chits that seem to be flowing onto the dais or through how complex of words are to be used as if they are everyday slangs. It is measured by the proportion to which you learn that the agenda at hand is something that can indeed be resolved upon if understood well and given the thought it demands. A committee earns its purpose when the question forces an entire room to pause, the negotiation that seemed impossible finally comes alive when someone just finds the right words.

That is the committee we intend to build.

As your executive board, we are not here to simply moderate your debate. Expect the committee to be directed to challenge your assumption, test your arguments and push you just a bit – all for you to understand that there's a lot away from generated speeches.

It almost becomes our duty to expect you to have quality research at hand. However, never let your research become a substitute for thinking. Speak with conviction and awareness. Speak with substance above volume.

Most importantly, earn your argument, delegates.

We want you to leave this committee having done something you could not have done alone. The seats of a committee that would teach you that diplomacy is rarely about getting what you want lies waiting. These would be the seats that are intended to teach you how even at most narrowing boundaries like legalities, there are always things to deliberate towards the greater good. A successful delegate would be one who realises the need for eternal improvement is what would guide the future of most spheres, but would know the pace of having it done, understanding the need of the hour.

May this letter affirm to you of fairness, impartiality, and an unwavering commitment to the integrity of this committee.

With that, delegates....

The floor is yours. Make it impossible to forget who stood upon it.

Regards,

Executive board

1. Committee and Agenda Overview

1.1. UNGA: The Sixth Committee – Legal

The Sixth Committee of the United Nations General Assembly is the principal forum of the General Assembly for the questions relating to international law. Unlike committees whose work is primarily political, economic or security-oriented, the Sixth Committee resolves international issues through the framework of legal obligations and principles of international law. It is to be known that all Member States of the United Nations are entitled to representation in the Committee.

The Committee's mandate is closely connected to Article 13(1)(a) of the Charter of the United Nations, which authorizes the General Assembly to encompass studies and make recommendations for the purpose of encouraging the progressive development of international law and its codification. The United Nations distinguishes between these two functions: codification concerns the formulation and systematization of rules already substantially reflected in State practice, while progressive development concerns the development of legal rules in areas where international law is insufficiently developed or where existing practice does not provide a sufficiently precise framework.

The Sixth Committee consequently serves as an important link between international legal scholarship, State practice, treaty-making, and the political pillars of the United Nations. Its work includes a broad range of questions, including treaty law, State responsibility, jurisdiction, diplomatic and consular law, international criminal law, the law of the sea, and the peaceful settlement of international disputes. The Committee also takes into consideration – the work of bodies such as the International Law Commission (ILC) and may contribute to the preparation and negotiation of international legal instruments for the resolving of matters pertaining to international peace.

It is important to be noted that the Sixth Committee is not an international court. It does not issue binding judgments determining the rights or liabilities of individual States like the International Court of Justice. Rather, as part of the General Assembly, it discusses legal questions and develops draft resolutions, declarations, conventions, recommendations, and other instruments for consideration by the Assembly. General Assembly committees discuss matters assigned to them and recommend draft resolutions and decisions to the General Assembly for consideration and action.

This distinction is particularly significant for the present agenda. Delegates are not being asked to recreate proceedings before the International Court of Justice or to issue a judicial judgment on the Indus Waters Treaty. Instead, they are being asked to examine what international law presently provides, where genuine legal uncertainty exists, and how States and the international

community may strengthen the legal framework governing treaty obligations during periods of conflict.

1.2. Agenda Overview

Addressing the Legal Status and Continuity of Bilateral Treaties in Times of Conflict: Examining the 2026 Dispute over the Indus Waters Treaty and the Limits of Unilateral Treaty Suspension, International Jurisdiction and State Sovereignty

The fundamental premise that all international treaties are built upon remains straight and clear – : States that voluntarily undertake international obligations are expected to perform them in good faith. Yet the international legal order must also account for circumstances in which relations between States rupture dramatically, armed conflict emerges, or a State considers continued performance of an obligation incompatible with its vital interests.

This agenda examines that tension through the contemporary dispute surrounding the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) between India and Pakistan.

Signed on 19 September 1960 with the assistance of the World Bank, the IWT established a comprehensive framework governing the use of the waters of the Indus River system. It allocated the three Eastern Rivers — Ravi, Beas and Sutlej — principally for India's use, while allocating the three Western Rivers — Indus, Jhelum and Chenab — principally for Pakistan's use, subject to specified rights and restrictions. The Treaty also created the Permanent Indus Commission and detailed mechanisms for resolving questions, differences and disputes arising from its interpretation and application. The significance of the Treaty extends beyond the allocation of water. It represents a long-standing example of bilateral cooperation continuing despite profound political tensions between its parties. The Treaty has historically remained operational through periods of severe India–Pakistan tension and armed conflict, making the question of its legal continuity particularly significant.

1.3. The 2026 Question

The present dispute raises a question extending beyond the immediate circumstances of the Indus Waters Treaty: what happens to a bilateral treaty when the political and security relationship between its parties fundamentally deteriorates?

International treaties are generally premised upon the stability of commitments undertaken by States. Once a treaty enters into force, its obligations are not ordinarily dependent upon the continued existence of friendly political relations between the parties. This principle is reflected in *pacta sunt servanda*, under which every treaty in force is binding upon its parties and must be performed in good faith.

At the same time, international law does not treat treaty obligations as entirely immune from extraordinary circumstances. The law of treaties recognizes specific grounds under which the operation of a treaty may be suspended or terminated, including circumstances involving a

material breach or, under strictly defined conditions, a fundamental change of circumstances. The Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties also establishes procedural requirements governing the invocation of such grounds. Consequently, a deterioration in diplomatic relations, the emergence of security concerns, or a dispute between treaty parties does not, in itself, necessarily determine the continued legal status of the treaty.

The central difficulty therefore lies in determining whether the circumstances invoked by a State fall within a recognized rule of international law capable of affecting the treaty's continued operation. This distinction is particularly significant in the present context: the question is not merely whether a State has compelling political or security reasons for reconsidering its obligations, but whether those circumstances produce a legal consequence recognized by international law. The 2026 dispute consequently places treaty stability, sovereign interests, security considerations, and the limits of unilateral State action in direct conversation with one another.

1.4. The Four Questions at the Heart of the Agenda

The agenda can be understood through four interconnected legal questions:

1.4.1. I. Treaty Continuity

Does a bilateral treaty remain legally operative when the political relationship between its parties deteriorates or armed conflict occurs?

The first question concerns the continued legal operation of bilateral treaties when the political or security relationship between their parties undergoes a significant deterioration. Treaties are generally intended to create obligations that persist beyond temporary changes in diplomatic relations, and international law does not ordinarily treat political hostility between States as sufficient, by itself, to extinguish those obligations. The emergence of armed conflict, however, may raise more complex questions regarding the applicability and performance of particular treaty provisions. Delegates must therefore examine whether a deterioration in relations can affect treaty obligations, and under what circumstances international law permits those obligations to be suspended, modified, or brought to an end.

1.4.2. II. Unilateral Suspension

Under what circumstances may one State unilaterally suspend the operation of a bilateral treaty?

The second question concerns the legal limits on a State's ability to suspend its obligations without the consent of the other treaty party. International law recognizes circumstances in which treaty obligations may be suspended, but these grounds are subject to specific legal conditions and, in certain cases, procedural requirements. The distinction between suspension, termination, withdrawal, and modification is therefore essential: each represents a different legal action and may require a different justification. The Committee must consider whether a State can rely upon changed political, security, or factual circumstances to suspend treaty

obligations unilaterally, and what threshold must be met before such action acquires legal validity.

1.4.3. III. International Jurisdiction

Who has the authority to determine whether a treaty has been violated, suspended, or otherwise affected?

The third question concerns who possesses the authority to interpret and resolve disputes arising from a treaty. Bilateral agreements may establish their own mechanisms for addressing disagreements, ranging from negotiations and commissions to neutral experts, arbitration, or judicial proceedings. Difficulties can arise when the parties disagree not only over the substance of their obligations, but also over which institution has the authority to determine that dispute. The Committee must therefore examine the relationship between State consent, treaty-based dispute-resolution mechanisms, international jurisdiction, and the possibility of competing or parallel proceedings.

1.4.4. IV. State Sovereignty

To what extent can a State's sovereign and security interests affect obligations that it has voluntarily undertaken under international law?

The fourth question addresses the relationship between State sovereignty and obligations voluntarily undertaken under international law. Sovereignty provides States with the authority to determine their policies and protect their national interests; however, States also exercise that sovereignty when they enter into binding international agreements. A State may consequently seek to invoke national security, territorial interests, or other sovereign concerns when circumstances surrounding a treaty change. The central issue is where international law draws the boundary between a State's sovereign freedom to respond to changing circumstances and its continuing responsibility to respect the international obligations to which it has consented.

2. The Indus Waters Treaty: History, Survival and the Contemporary



2.1. The Indus Basin

The Indus River system is one of the major transboundary river systems of South Asia, spanning territories in China, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The basin is centered around the Indus River and its tributaries, with the river originating in the Tibetan Plateau before flowing through the Himalayan region and across Pakistan to the Arabian Sea. Six principal rivers form the foundation of the system addressed by the Indus Waters Treaty: the Indus, Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej.

The basin has long been fundamental to the agricultural, economic, and human development of the region. Particularly in Pakistan, where a substantial proportion of agriculture depends upon irrigation from the Indus river system, the availability and regulation of these waters carry significant economic and strategic importance. India, as an upstream State for several of the rivers, similarly relies upon the basin for agriculture, hydroelectricity, and other forms of water use. The interconnected nature of the river system means that decisions concerning the use, diversion, storage, or development of its waters can have consequences extending beyond national boundaries.

The political significance of the basin increased considerably following the Partition of British India in 1947. The division created an international boundary across a river system whose irrigation infrastructure had historically operated as an interconnected network. Several

important headworks and canal systems were located in territories that became part of India, while many of the agricultural areas dependent upon those waters became part of Pakistan. Water therefore became an immediate element of the broader India–Pakistan relationship.

Early disagreements over the control and distribution of canal waters demonstrated the difficulty of managing a shared river system between two newly independent States. Although interim arrangements were reached, the absence of a comprehensive and permanent framework left water management vulnerable to political tensions. Negotiations subsequently developed with the involvement of the World Bank, eventually producing the Indus Waters Treaty in 1960.

The Treaty sought to transform a potentially recurring source of conflict into a structured system of allocation, cooperation, and dispute settlement. Rather than dividing the waters of every river on a proportional basis, it established a more specific allocation: the Eastern Rivers — Ravi, Beas and Sutlej — were allocated for India's unrestricted use subject to the Treaty, while the Western Rivers — Indus, Jhelum and Chenab — were allocated principally to Pakistan, while preserving specified rights for India.

This arrangement created a legal framework intended to regulate not only the use of the rivers themselves, but also the construction and operation of water-related infrastructure, information-sharing, cooperation, and the resolution of disagreements between the two States. The resulting Treaty would subsequently remain in operation through several periods of serious political confrontation and armed conflict, making its durability an important feature of the present legal debate.

2.2. The Indus Water Treaty

The Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) was signed by India and Pakistan on 19 September 1960, following nearly a decade of negotiations facilitated by the World Bank. The Treaty was designed to establish a permanent framework for the use and management of the waters of the Indus river system and to reduce the possibility of water-related disputes becoming a recurring source of conflict between the two States. Rather than attempting to divide the entire river system proportionally between India and Pakistan, the Treaty adopted a system based principally upon the allocation of specific rivers to each State.

Under this framework, the waters of the Eastern Rivers — the Ravi, Beas and Sutlej — were allocated for India's unrestricted use, subject to the provisions of the Treaty. The Western Rivers — the Indus, Jhelum and Chenab — were allocated principally to Pakistan, while India retained specified rights to use these waters for purposes permitted under the Treaty, including domestic use, non-consumptive uses, certain agricultural uses, and hydroelectric power generation subject to prescribed conditions. This distinction forms the central structural feature of the IWT.

The Treaty does not simply establish an allocation of river waters. It also regulates how the parties may develop and utilize the rivers, including provisions concerning storage, agricultural use, hydroelectric projects, exchange of information, and the construction and operation of certain water infrastructure. Its detailed technical provisions were intended to provide greater predictability in circumstances where activities undertaken by one State could affect the interests of the other.

A central institutional feature of the Treaty is the Permanent Indus Commission, consisting of one Commissioner appointed by each State. The Commission provides a continuing channel of communication between India and Pakistan and is responsible for a range of functions, including the exchange of information, cooperation on matters arising under the Treaty, and consideration of questions concerning its implementation. The Commission therefore serves not merely as an administrative body, but as an institutional mechanism through which the Treaty can continue to operate even when broader bilateral relations are strained.

The IWT also establishes a graduated framework for addressing disagreements. Questions arising from the interpretation or implementation of the Treaty may initially be addressed through the Permanent Indus Commission. Certain technical differences may be referred to a Neutral Expert, while disputes falling within the Treaty's specified framework may be submitted to a Court of Arbitration. This layered system reflects an attempt to distinguish between different categories of disagreement and assign each an appropriate mechanism for resolution.

The Treaty is therefore significant not merely because it allocates water between two States, but because it establishes an entire legal and institutional framework governing a shared international river system. Its provisions concerning allocation, permitted uses, information-sharing, institutional cooperation, and dispute settlement are interconnected. Consequently, any question concerning the suspension, interpretation, or continued operation of the Treaty may have implications extending beyond the immediate distribution of water to the broader principles of treaty continuity, State responsibility, jurisdiction, and sovereign rights.

The durability of this framework is particularly significant to the present agenda. The IWT was concluded in the context of profound political hostility between India and Pakistan and has subsequently operated through periods of armed conflict and severe diplomatic tension. Its continued existence therefore provides an important case study for examining whether, and under what circumstances, international treaty obligations remain legally operative when the political relationship between treaty parties deteriorates substantially.

2.3. Survival of the Treaty Past Crises

The durability of the Indus Waters Treaty is closely connected to the fact that it established a standing legal and institutional framework rather than relying upon continuously friendly relations between India and Pakistan. Since its conclusion in 1960, the Treaty has remained in

operation through periods of severe political tension and armed conflict. The World Bank has described the Treaty as having survived repeated tensions, including military conflict, while continuing to provide a framework for irrigation and hydropower development.

A major factor in this continuity has been the Permanent Indus Commission, which provides a permanent channel for communication and technical cooperation even when broader diplomatic relations deteriorate. Disagreements have also been managed through the Treaty's institutional dispute-settlement mechanisms rather than automatically becoming grounds for abandoning the agreement. The Treaty has consequently demonstrated a degree of institutional resilience: disputes over projects and interpretation have occurred, but the existence of a legal process has provided the parties with mechanisms through which those disagreements can be addressed.

This history is particularly relevant to the present agenda because it demonstrates that political conflict and treaty operation have not historically been treated as mutually exclusive under the IWT. The Treaty itself provides that its provisions continue in force until terminated by a duly ratified treaty between the two governments. The contemporary question is therefore not simply whether India and Pakistan have experienced conflict before, but whether the circumstances and legal arguments surrounding the 2026 dispute create a materially different question concerning the Treaty's continued operation.

2.3.1. Key Moments

1965 — India–Pakistan War: The Treaty remained operational despite armed conflict between the parties.

1971 — India–Pakistan War: A second major war did not result in the termination of the Treaty.

1999 — Kargil Conflict: Severe military confrontation again occurred without the Treaty being formally terminated.

2000s–2010s — Project Disputes: Disagreements concerning hydroelectric projects, including Baglihar and Kishenganga, were addressed through the mechanisms established by the Treaty rather than through its abandonment.

2016 — Renewed Tensions: Following the Uri attack, India announced a review of the Treaty. The World Bank subsequently became involved in managing competing requests concerning the Treaty's dispute-settlement mechanisms.

The historical record therefore presents an important baseline for delegates: the IWT has previously demonstrated continuity amid conflict, while simultaneously accommodating serious disagreements through its institutional mechanisms.

The significance of the 2026 dispute lies in determining whether the present circumstances fit within that established pattern or raise a fundamentally different question under international treaty law.

2.4. The 2026 Dispute

The present phase of the Indus Waters dispute began in April 2025, when India announced that it was placing the Indus Waters Treaty in “abeyance” following the Pahalgam attack. India linked the decision to its security concerns and argued that continued cooperation under the Treaty could not be considered separately from Pakistan's alleged support for cross-border terrorism. India has subsequently maintained that the Treaty will remain in abeyance until Pakistan addresses these concerns, while also arguing that changing technological, demographic and environmental circumstances require the Treaty to be reconsidered.

Pakistan has rejected India's position and maintained that the Treaty remains legally binding. In communications to the United Nations, Pakistan argued that the IWT contains no provision permitting unilateral suspension and pointed to Article XII(4), which provides that the Treaty remains in force until terminated by a duly ratified treaty concluded between the two governments. Pakistan has consequently treated India's declaration of abeyance as a violation of the Treaty's framework and has continued to rely upon its dispute-settlement provisions.

The dispute consequently moved beyond the substantive question of water allocation and into a more fundamental question of treaty status and jurisdiction. In 2026, proceedings under the IWT's dispute-settlement framework considered whether India's decision to place the Treaty in abeyance had any effect upon the Treaty's continued legal operation. On 31 August 2026, the Court of Arbitration constituted under the IWT issued an Award concerning the Treaty's status, alongside an Order concerning interim measures relating to the Ratle Hydroelectric Project. The Court concluded that the Treaty remained in force and that India remained bound by its obligations under the agreement.

India, however, did not participate in the proceedings and has rejected the authority of the Court of Arbitration over the matter. New Delhi has maintained that the arbitral process itself was constituted contrary to the Treaty's provisions and that its decisions cannot affect India's sovereign decisions concerning the Treaty or its infrastructure projects.

The 2026 dispute therefore presents two connected but distinct legal questions. The first concerns the substantive status of the Indus Waters Treaty: whether circumstances surrounding the deterioration of India–Pakistan relations can provide a lawful basis for suspending or otherwise altering the Treaty's operation. The second concerns jurisdiction: whether the dispute-settlement mechanism established under the Treaty has authority to determine that question in circumstances where one party rejects the tribunal's jurisdiction.

The significance of the dispute consequently extends beyond the immediate India–Pakistan relationship. It places before the international legal community a broader question concerning

the stability of treaty obligations, the limits of unilateral suspension, the effect of security considerations upon treaty performance, and the relationship between State sovereignty and international jurisdiction.

3. International Legal Instruments

3.1. Indus Waters Treaty, 1960

The primary legal instrument governing the India–Pakistan relationship over the Indus river system. Its provisions are directly relevant to questions of treaty continuity, unilateral action, dispute settlement and modification.

- **Article II — Eastern Rivers:** Establishes the allocation and use of the Ravi, Beas and Sutlej.
- **Article III — Western Rivers:** Establishes Pakistan’s rights over the Indus, Jhelum and Chenab while defining specified uses available to India.
- **Article IV — Application:** Sets out obligations concerning the use, development and regulation of the rivers.
- **Article VIII — Permanent Indus Commission:** Establishes the institutional mechanism for continued communication, cooperation and implementation.
- **Article IX — Settlement of Differences and Disputes:** Creates the Treaty’s graduated dispute-settlement framework involving the Commission, a Neutral Expert and a Court of Arbitration.
- **Article XII — Final Provisions:** Governs modification and termination, including the conditions under which the Treaty may be modified or terminated.

3.2. Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, 1969

The principal codification of the modern law of treaties. Although its direct treaty application depends on the States concerned, many of its provisions reflect or are used as evidence of customary international law. It provides the broader legal framework for interpreting, suspending and terminating treaties.

- **Article 26 — Pacta Sunt Servanda:** Treaties in force are binding upon the parties and must be performed in good faith.
- **Article 27 — Internal Law and Observance:** A State generally cannot invoke its internal law as justification for failing to perform a treaty.
- **Article 31 — General Rule of Interpretation:** Establishes the principal rules for interpreting treaty provisions.

- **Article 32 — Supplementary Means of Interpretation:** Permits recourse to preparatory work and the circumstances of a treaty's conclusion where appropriate.
- **Article 42 — Validity and Continuance:** Addresses the validity and continuance of treaties under international law.
- **Article 54 — Termination or Withdrawal:** Addresses termination or withdrawal by consent or under the provisions of the treaty.
- **Article 60 — Material Breach:** Establishes circumstances in which a material breach may provide grounds for termination or suspension.
- **Article 61 — Supervening Impossibility:** Addresses situations in which performance of a treaty becomes impossible.
- **Article 62 — Fundamental Change of Circumstances:** Establishes the stringent conditions under which a fundamental change may be invoked.
- **Article 65 — Procedure:** Establishes procedures for invoking grounds for terminating, withdrawing from or suspending a treaty.
- **Article 73 — Armed Conflict:** Clarifies that the Convention does not itself settle questions arising from the outbreak of hostilities between States.

3.3. ILC Draft Articles on the Effects of Armed Conflicts on Treaties, 2011

A specialised framework examining the effect of armed conflict on treaty relations. The International Law Commission adopted 18 draft articles and an annex in 2011; the General Assembly subsequently took note of the work. It therefore serves primarily as guidance rather than a binding treaty.

- **Article 3 — General Principle:** An armed conflict does not, by itself, automatically terminate or suspend treaties.
- **Articles 6–7 — Operation of Treaties:** Address the circumstances in which treaties continue to operate during armed conflict.
- **Article 8 — Factors Indicating Operation or Termination:** Identifies factors relevant to determining whether a treaty continues to operate.
- **Article 14 — Self-Defence:** Addresses the effect of lawful self-defence on treaty relations.
- **Article 18 — Other Cases:** Preserves the relevance of other rules concerning termination, suspension, material breach, impossibility and fundamental change.
- **Annex:** Identifies categories of treaties whose subject matter may indicate continued operation during armed conflict, including treaties concerning international watercourses and related installations.

3.4. UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, 1997

Provides broader legal context for international watercourse law and may serve as a supplementary reference when considering cooperation, equitable utilisation and prevention of harm in shared river systems.

- **Article 5 — Equitable and Reasonable Utilization:** Establishes the principle of equitable and reasonable use of international watercourses.
- **Article 6 — Factors Relevant to Equitable Utilization:** Identifies factors relevant to determining

4. QARMA

Questions a Resolution must answer

1. What criteria and legal principles govern the continuity of the Indus Waters Treaty during periods of heightened conflict or strained bilateral relations?
2. What legal grounds, if any, permit a signatory State to unilaterally modify or suspend its treaty obligations?
3. What balance can be achieved between the national security and sovereign rights of both nations and their ongoing commitments under international law?
4. What legal and institutional safeguards should be established to ensure the continued implementation of the Treaty during future crises?

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