How Taliban's plan to dam Kabul-Kunar basin will squeeze water-stressed Pakistan further

Following the Taliban's return to power, Pakistan-Afghanistan relations spiralled downwards. Despite news of some active backchanneling, Pakistan's Defence Minister Khawaja Asif publicly lashed out at the Afghan Taliban for what he described as their ingratitude, accusing them of repaying Pakistan's decades of shelter and support with hostility.

Roughly 15 major border clashes have been recorded between the two countries so far. The latest round of cross-border fighting and airstrikes, which began on October 9, 2025, has pushed bilateral ties to a new low. Multiple rounds of peace talks—facilitated by Turkey and Qatar—have failed to bring lasting peace. Tensions have now spilt over into the realm of water resources, after Taliban supreme leader Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada ordered the construction of dams on the Kunar River.

Neither is this the first time Afghanistan has shown interest in constructing dams on the Kunar River, nor is it the first time such plans have raised alarms in Pakistan. What is different now is that the intention coincides with an ongoing cycle of border tensions.

The Afghan Taliban, once regarded as an ally, was seen in Islamabad as a partner with whom the establishment could eventually conclude a long-pending agreement on sharing common rivers. Alas, that prospect now appears distant, and the Kunar River could be the first in line from Afghanistan's side to further squeeze Pakistan's already stressed water resources. Pakistan's mismanagement and use of terrorism as a foreign policy tool against India has cost Islamabad the suspension of the Indus Water Treaty (IWT).

Kunar has an interesting geography. Technically part of the Indus river system, it nevertheless lies outside the framework of the IWT. The river originates as the Chitral, rising near the Chiantar glacier close to the Gilgit–Chitral border. It flows through Pakistan as the Chitral River before crossing into Afghanistan, where it is known as the Kunar, and then joins the Kabul River in Nangarhar. The combined flow subsequently re-enters Pakistan and eventually merges with the Indus near Attock.

During the winter months, when Indus River levels decline, the Chitral–Kunar–Kabul network becomes crucial for Pakistan's irrigation, hydropower generation, and drinking water across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab. By contrast, Afghanistan's current consumptive use of these waters remains relatively low compared to its potential, as many planned dams and irrigation projects are either incomplete or still only on paper.

Estimates suggest that the construction of dams on the Kunar could reduce these flows by roughly 16 per cent, directly affecting early cropping, water storage, and energy generation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and downstream Punjab. This is a significant figure for a country whose agriculture is highly water-intensive.

And while this may seem unfair, Pakistan's water predicament is also self-inflicted. First, its long-standing use of terrorism as an instrument of policy has frayed relations with both Afghanistan and India, with whom it shares river systems. Second, structural water mismanagement has gone largely unaddressed. From being a water-abundant state in 1951, Pakistan has become water-scarce and is now heading towards conditions of absolute scarcity; annual water availability has fallen below 1,000 cubic metres per person—and may already be well past this threshold—with serious implications for food production.

The population is growing at roughly 2.5–2.6 per cent annually, even as water storage capacity and governance reforms have lagged behind. The Water and Power Development Authority has long been perceived as a corrupt institution, frequently accused of diverting water in favour of Punjab at the expense of other provinces. Unsurprisingly, this has fuelled water conflicts across Pakistan, with frequent and bitter inter-provincial clashes over water sharing, particularly between Sindh and Punjab. Climate change compounds this risk. Glacial melt in the western Himalayas and Hindu Kush has become less predictable; snowmelt patterns are shifting; extreme events are more frequent. Together, these trends create rising potential for hydropolitical tension and environmental insecurity in a basin that still lacks any formal water-sharing framework between Kabul and Islamabad.

Earlier, both Pakistan and Afghanistan discussed joint management of common rivers. The first serious conversation focused on a 1,500 MW hydropower project on the Kunar River—a major tributary of Kabul. In 2013, the two sides even talked about establishing a Kabul River Basin Management Commission to coordinate data-sharing, flows and development. However, the opportunity was allowed to slip away. Pakistan now finds itself caught in a dual chokehold. In April 2025, India suspended the 1960 IWT, the only long-standing negotiated framework between upper and lower riparians in South Asia. Soon thereafter, plans to divert the Chenab through new inter-basin canals were announced. At the same time, Afghanistan—unbound by any treaty—declared that it would dam the Kunar River before it returns to Pakistani territory.

In fact, the Taliban first talked about building dams in January 2024, when the Taliban government first announced the construction of a dam on the Kunar; some Pakistani officials publicly described the move as a "hostile act against Pakistan". Later that year, a Taliban official went further, speaking of plans to construct three dams on the river, reportedly with investment from a Chinese firm—striking, given that China is also one of Pakistan's closest security and economic partners. That particular proposal appears to have stalled, with little visible follow-through. India's role adds a sharper geopolitical edge. New Delhi has consistently aided Afghanistan in building dams and storage on the Kabul system—most notably the Salma (Afghan–India Friendship) Dam in Herat and the Shahtoot Dam on the Maidan River, a tributary of the Kabul, a $236 million project designed to supply water to around two million residents of Kabul. Indian technical and financial involvement in the proposed Kunar-Panjshir and other Kabul basin projects effectively turns the Kabul River into an extension of South Asia's broader water competition. India publicly presents these projects as people-centric development, but Pakistan reads them as strategic envelopment.

Historically, Islamabad comforted itself with two assumptions: that terrorism could remain a plausible tool of policy, and that water would remain insulated from geopolitics. The IWT with India and the absence of a formal pact with Afghanistan were treated as shields—one legal, the other geographic. Those assumptions have now been broken from both directions. From the east, an agreement that survived wars and repeated crises has been put in abeyance, signalling that New Delhi no longer sees water as permanently fenced off from security decisions. Official Pakistani data now point to a sharp drop in Indus basin flows in the wake of India's move, with releases from key dams reportedly down by about 15 per cent compared to the same period the previous year. Major reservoirs have edged closer to their dead storage levels, sparking alarm ahead of a critical Kharif season. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's post-attack declaration that "blood and water cannot flow together" is not mere rhetoric; it has become a guiding principle. From the west, Afghanistan's planned dams on the Kunar, combined with India's deepening role in Afghan hydel infrastructure, threaten to constrict the water supply to Pakistan.

Unsurprisingly, this dual squeeze and growing closeness of the Afghan Taliban with India has triggered anxious debate in Pakistan's strategic community, producing dangerously simplistic ideas. One recurring proposal is to exploit Pakistan's status as an upper riparian on the Chitral segment by diverting or storing water before it crosses into Afghanistan and becomes the Kunar. However, the reality is far more sobering. Technically and economically, Pakistan's capacity to divert or store significant volumes upstream is limited. The Chitral Valley is mountainous and seismically sensitive; large-scale diversion or storage would be enormously expensive, environmentally risky and logistically complex. Infrastructure of that magnitude would take time and money that Pakistan does not have, especially under current fiscal stress. Multiple rounds of peace talks—facilitated by Turkey and Qatar—have failed to bring lasting peace. Tensions have now spilt over into the realm of water resources, after Taliban supreme leader Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada ordered the construction of dams on the Kunar River.

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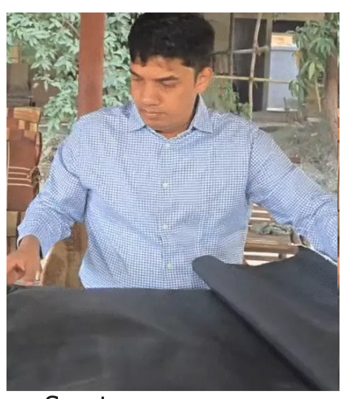
Surti engineer's new invention to stop animal slaughter



Surat

Raviraj Desai, a 34-year-old civil engineer and MBA degree holder from Surat, has invented a unique 'Vegan Leather' inspired by the principles of 'Ahimsa' and 'Jivadaya' of Jainism and Swaminarayan Sampradaya. The engineer has prepared the best quality 'Apple Leather' from 50 to 80 tons of apple waste thrown away in juice factories. This leather, which is 75% cheaper than traditional leather and has a lifespan of 15-17 years, has given the leather industry a non-violent alternative to stop animal slaughter.

Surti engineer Raviraj has presented a business model by combining religious values ??with technology.

If we talk about this innovation of Surti engineer Raviraj, then his family and religious traditions have a major contribution behind this idea. In today's modern era, where millions of animals are sacrificed for fashion, he has presented a non-violent business model to the world by combining the basic values ??of religion with technology.

Nonviolent business model presented to the world

Raviraj Desai, who originally hails from Surat, has set up his processing plant in Himachal Pradesh. The main reason for this is the easy availability of raw materials. Apples are produced in abundance in Himachal Pradesh and the waste from juice factories is easily available there. Using Surat's business acumen and business vision, Raviraj has turned this waste from the hill state into a valuable resource. It took one and a half to two years of hard work to prepare leather from waste apples. Usually the apples we eat on the dining table are of high quality, but about 50% of the apples are those that have been eaten by birds or have fallen naturally and become spoiled. About 50 to 80 tons of such waste was thrown away every month. Raviraj has been working hard for the last one and a half to two years on the process of collecting these waste apples and making leather from them. This process is completely eco-friendly, an application has also been filed with the Government of India for its trademark.

Despite being cheap, vegan leather has the same look as luxury fashion. Compared to the animal leather available in the market, vegan leather is also very affordable. If the price of genuine leather in the market is 100, this Apple leather is prepared for only 25. Thus, despite being cheap, it gives the same look and feel as luxury fashion, which makes it an attractive leather for both common people and big brands.

The lifespan of vegan leather is approximately 15 to 17 years. According to Surti engineer Raviraj, the lifespan of this Apple leather is approximately 15 to 17 years. Currently, laboratory testing is showing good results in terms of its life and strength. Compared to normal vegan leather (which is plastic or synthetic), this is a natural product, so it does not harm the environment and lasts for a long time. Being a natural product, it does not harm the environment. Along with food, now there is a vegan option in clothing as well. Raviraj Desai's main objective is to popularize the 'vegan concept' worldwide. Just as people are becoming vegan in food today, it is necessary to bring about a change in clothing as well. He aims to collect apple waste from the entire Himachal Pradesh and produce it on a large scale. This effort will stop animal slaughter and establish a new and non-violent identity in the Indian leather industry.

This project will also provide employment to locals. Raviraj Desai said, "There are two types of apples. One is the table variety that we eat, but 50% of the apples are those that have been pecked by birds, damaged or fallen naturally. These apples go to waste. We collect 50 to 80 tons of such waste every month. In the coming time, we aim to collect apple waste from the entire Himachal Pradesh and convert it into 'Apple Spirit' and 'Apple Leather'. This project is also providing employment to the locals.

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