

*\* Please note the programme and speaker list are subject to changes.*



## ISAS ONLINE WORKSHOP

# Water Disputes, Security and Cooperation in South Asia

20-21 May 2026 | Online (Via Zoom)

### ABOUT THE WORKSHOP

Amid the accelerating impacts of climate change, the widening water supply-demand gap and strained bilateral ties, transboundary rivers have heightened political tensions between South Asian riparian neighbours. In 2025, India decided to hold the Indus Waters Treaty with Pakistan “in abeyance” following a terrorist attack near Pahalgam in Jammu & Kashmir. New Delhi accused Pakistan of supporting the terror group behind the deadly attack, which Islamabad denied. Beyond the two nuclear South Asian countries, India and Bangladesh share 54 rivers. They have agreed to renew the Ganga/Ganges Waters Treaty, which will expire in December 2026. This treaty, as Bangladesh’s Foreign Minister, Khalilur Rahman, said, “will be the first test of fixing bilateral ties”. India and Nepal also have river water issues. Pakistan and Afghanistan share nine rivers, but there are no formal agreements or mechanisms to manage them. Tension escalated when, during the military confrontation in late 2025, the Taliban decided to build a dam on the shared Kunar River. Further, neighbouring China plays an increasingly significant role in South Asian water matters, as some of the region’s important rivers originate in the Tibetan Plateau.

More than transboundary river issues, internal disputes over water in the respective South Asian countries cause colossal political stress. Within India, long-standing inter-state disputes, such as between Haryana and Punjab, demonstrate the challenges of federal water governance. In Pakistan, Sindh and Punjab frequently clash over the waters of the shared rivers. Meanwhile, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bhutan have their own internal water matters.

These dynamics – geopolitical tensions, domestic pressures, climate change, and evolving legal-institutional responses – underscore the complexity of transboundary water governance in South Asia. The workshop will address the following and many other key questions:

1. How political are the transboundary waters, and to what extent do they intersect with broader security and diplomatic tensions between the South Asian riparian neighbours?
2. Can the South Asian countries fairly cooperate over shared rivers, and what institutional mechanisms or legal frameworks could support such cooperation?
3. How challenging is it for the South Asian states to manage their domestic water disputes, particularly in federal, regional or multi-ethnic contexts?
4. In what ways does climate change catalyse water-related tensions and disputes in South Asia, and how might it reshape regional water and security agendas?

## PROGRAMME

20 MAY 2026 | 4.00PM – 7.15PM (SINGAPORE TIME)

4.00pm **Opening Remarks**  
**Dr Amit Ranjan**  
Research Fellow  
Institute of South Asian Studies, NUS

## SESSION 1 – WATER DISPUTES ACROSS NATIONAL DIVIDES I

4.10pm Chairperson  
**Dr Amit Ranjan**  
Research Fellow  
Institute of South Asian Studies, NUS

4.15pm Speakers  
**Dr David J Devlaeminck**  
Associate Professor, School of Law  
Chongqing University  
China

**Dr Nidhi Nagabhatla**  
Senior Research Fellow  
United Nations University Institute on  
Comparative Regional Integration Studies  
Brugge, Belgium

4.25pm **Dr Tanushree Baruah**  
Assistant Professor, Department of Economics  
Cotton University  
Guwahati, India

**Dr Anamika Barua**  
Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati  
India

**Dr Rupam Bhaduri**  
Post-Doctoral Fellow  
Centre for Disaster Management and Research  
Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati  
India

4.35pm **Ms Monzima Haque**  
Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations  
University of Dhaka  
Bangladesh

4.45pm **Interactive Session**

5.30pm **End of Session**

## SESSION 2 – WATER DISPUTES IN SOUTH ASIA: CONTEXTS AND COSTS

- 5.45pm Chairperson  
**Professor Ian Talbot**  
Emeritus Professor, History of Modern South Asia  
University of Southampton  
United Kingdom
- 5.50pm Speakers  
**Dr Udisha Saklani**  
Lecturer, Human Geography and Climate  
Department of Geography  
King's College London  
United Kingdom
- 6.00pm **Dr Dipak Gyawali**  
Pragya (Academician)  
Nepal Academy of Science and Technology  
Kathmandu, Nepal
- 6.10pm **Ms Saumya Kumar**  
Assistant Professor, Centre for Disaster Management  
Jamsetji Tata School of Disaster Studies  
Tata Institute of Social Sciences  
Mumbai, India
- 6.20pm **Interactive Session**
- 7.15pm **End of Session**

## PROGRAMME

21 MAY 2026 | 4.00PM – 7.15PM (SINGAPORE TIME)

## SESSION 3 – INTERNAL WATER ISSUES AND DISPUTES

- 4.00pm Chairperson  
**Dr Imran Ahmed**  
Research Fellow  
Institute of South Asian Studies, NUS
- 4.05pm Speakers  
**Dr Ambar Kumar Ghosh**  
Associate Fellow  
Observer Research Foundation  
Kolkata, India
- 4.15pm **Ms Fatima Malik**  
Assistant Professor  
Beaconhouse National University  
Lahore, Pakistan

- 4.25pm **Dr Sufia Khanom**  
Senior Research Fellow  
Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies  
Dhaka, Bangladesh
- 4.35pm **Ms Nabeela Siddiqui**  
Assistant Professor  
Vinayaka Mission's Law School  
Chennai, India
- Dr Pramod Jaiswal**  
Research Director  
Nepal Institute for International Cooperation and Engagement  
Kathmandu, Nepal
- Mr Dennis Mombauer**  
Director, Research & Knowledge Management  
SLYCAN Trust  
Colombo, Sri Lanka
- Ms Kencho Pelzom**  
Social Development Consultant  
World Bank  
Bhutan
- 4.45pm **Interactive Session**
- 5.30pm **End of Session**

#### **SESSION 4 – WATER DISPUTES ACROSS NATIONAL DIVIDES II**

- Chairperson
- 5.45pm **Dr Ivan Lidarev**  
Research Fellow  
Institute of South Asian Studies, NUS
- Speakers
- 5.50pm **Mr David Michel**  
Senior Associate, Global Food and Water Security Program  
Centre for Strategic and International Studies  
Washington D C, United States
- 6.00pm **Dr Agnieszka Małgorzata Nitza-Makowska**  
Research Fellow, Asia Centre  
University of Tartu  
Estonia
- Dr Aleksandra Jaskólska**  
Assistant Professor

Faculty of Political Science and International Studies  
University of Warsaw  
Poland

**Dr Elo Süld**  
Head, University of Tartu Asia Centre  
And Lecturer, School of Theology and Religious Studies  
University of Tartu  
Estonia

6.10pm **Dr Fazalullah Akhtar**  
Senior Researcher, Center for Development Research  
University of Bonn  
Germany

6.20pm **Dr Mark Wang**  
Professor and Director  
Centre for Contemporary Chinese Studies  
School of Geography  
University of Melbourne  
Australia

**Dr Ian Rutherford**  
Honorary (Principal Fellow)  
School of Geography, Earth and Atmospheric Sciences  
University of Melbourne  
Australia

**Ms Genevieve Donnellon-May**  
Researcher  
Oxford Global Society  
United Kingdom

6.30pm **Interactive Session**

7.05pm **Closing Remarks**  
**Dr Amit Ranjan**  
Research Fellow  
Institute of South Asian Studies, NUS

7.15pm **End of Workshop**

## ABOUT THE SESSIONS

### Session 1 – Water Disputes Across National Divides I

During this session, the participants will examine India's water relations with neighbouring riparian states, including Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. The first presentation revisits India-Pakistan water relations through the lens of the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) and explores its dispute settlement mechanism. The second presentation employs a comparative qualitative analysis of India's bilateral water relations with Bhutan and Nepal to examine how trust and power interact in shaping

cooperation outcomes across South Asia's Himalayan river basins. The final presentation analyses why rivers other than the Teesta and the Ganga receive comparatively limited attention, often obscuring the routine yet significant forms of everyday cooperation that continue between India and Bangladesh.

### **Session 2 – Water Disputes in South Asia: Contexts and Costs**

The first presentation in this session argues that water security in South Asia is best understood not merely as a condition of scarcity, but also as a political language of statecraft. The second presentation applies a cultural theory approach to analyse water issues in South Asia. The final presentation explores international law relating to transboundary water governance and disasters, while also highlighting a quieter transformation unfolding along the tributaries of the Ganga: the emergence of women taking centre stage in responding to the growing impacts of climate change and challenging traditionally gendered social roles.

### **Session 3 – Internal Water Issues and Disputes**

This session examines domestic water issues across the South Asian countries. The first presentation unpacks the three key drivers behind the complex phenomenon of multilayered interstate water disputes in India: the absence of an integrated approach to river basin governance, constitutional and legal ambiguities, coupled with the complexities of federal governance structures, and a flawed understanding of food security. The second presentation explores the political economy of water conflict in Pakistan, focusing on the Indus River System as both a vital economic resource and a source of political power. The third presentation investigates how local conflicts in Teesta-dependent areas in Bangladesh escalate into broader tensions. The final presentation examines water governance challenges in four South Asian countries – Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives – which together reflect the full spectrum of the region's water governance paradox.

### **Session 4 – Water Disputes Across National Divides II**

This session returns to the theme of transboundary river water disputes in South Asia. The first presentation examines how securing the region's sustainable water future will require integrated policies and collaborative strategies to build societal resilience among communities dependent on shared Indus river systems. The second presentation explores how India and China navigate a high-stakes transboundary river relationship along the Himalayan frontier, where binding institutional rules remain limited and strategic mistrust persists. The third presentation highlights a fundamental paradox in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations over transboundary water resources, demonstrating how water issues are deeply intertwined with broader political relations and are shaped by the ongoing tensions and conflicts between the two countries. The final presentation assesses China's proposed 'Red Flag River' inter-basin diversion project in Tibet and examines its implications for downstream riparian regions.

### **ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS** *(In Alphabetical Order)*

**Agnieszka Małgorzata Nitza-Makowska** is a Research Fellow at the Asia Centre in the University of Tartu in Estonia.

**Aleksandra Jaskólska** is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Political Science and International Studies in the University of Warsaw in Poland.

**Ambar Kumar Ghosh** is an Associate Fellow in Development Studies in the Observer Research Foundation in Kolkata in India.

**Amit Ranjan** is a Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies in the National University of Singapore.

**Anamika Baruah** is a Professor with the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences and Centre for Water Research in the Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati in Assam in India.

**David J Devlaeminck** is an Associate Professor at the School of Law in Chongqing University in China and an Associate Research Fellow in the United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies in Tokyo in Japan.

**David Michel** is a Senior Associate with the Global Food and Water Security Program at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC in the United States.

**Dennis Mombauer** is the Director of Research at SLYCAN Trust in Colombo in Sri Lanka.

**Dipak Gyawali** is Pragma (Academician) at the Nepal Academy of Science and Technology, Chair of Interdisciplinary Analysts and former Chair of Nepal Water Conservation Foundation.

**Elo Süld** is Head at the University of Tartu Asia Centre and Lecturer at the School of Theology and Religious Studies in the University of Tartu in Estonia.

**Fatima Malik** is an Assistant Professor at Beaconhouse National University in Lahore in Pakistan.

**Fazlullah Akhtar** is a Senior Researcher at the Center for Development Research in the University of Bonn in Germany.

**Genevieve Donnellon-May** is a Researcher with Oxford Global Society in the United Kingdom and with the Institute for Security and Development Policy in Sweden.

**Ian Rutherford** is a Professor in the School of Geography at the University of Melbourne in Australia.

**Ian Talbot** is an Emeritus Professor in History of Modern South Asia at the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom.

**Imran Ahmed** is a Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies in the National University of Singapore.

**Ivan Lidarev** is a Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies in the National University of Singapore.

**Kencho Pelzom** is a Social Development Consultant for the World Bank in Thimphu in Bhutan.

**Mark Wang** is a Professor at the School of Geography, Earth and Atmospheric Sciences in the University of Melbourne in Australia.

**Monzima Haque** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Relations at the University of Dhaka in Bangladesh and a PhD candidate at the School of International Service in American University in the United States.

**Nabeela Siddiqi** is an Assistant Professor at Vinayaka Mission's Law School in Chennai in India.

**Nidhi Nagabhatla** is a Senior Research Fellow at the United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies and Faculty of Economics and Business Administration in the Department of Economics in the University of Ghent in Belgium.

**Pramod Jaiswal** is the Research Director at Nepal Institute for International Cooperation and Engagement and Faculty at Central Department of Political Science in Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu in Nepal.

**Rupam Bhaduri** is a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Centre for Disaster Management and Research in the Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati in Assam in India.

**Saumya Kumar** is an Assistant Professor at the Centre for Disaster Management at the Jamsetji Tata School of Disaster Studies in Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai in India.

**Sufia Khanom** is a Senior Research Fellow at the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies in Dhaka in Bangladesh.

**Tanushree Baruah** is an Assistant Professor with the Department of Economics in Cotton University in Guwahati in India.

**Udisha Saklani** is a Lecturer in Human Geography and Climate at King's College London in the United Kingdom.

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