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The UN Water Conference 2026: Can it Transform South Asia’s Transboundary Cooperation?

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The 2026 UN Water Conference could provide an impetus to South Asia’s water cooperation if it addresses the region’s unique challenges



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South Asia is at a critical juncture in its regional water governance. The recent triggers—the ‘[abeyance](#)’ of the [Indus Water Treaty](#) by India, China’s mega dam on [Yarlung Tsangpo \(Brahmaputra\)](#), the approaching [expiry of the Ganga Water Treaty in 2026](#), and the unresolved Teesta issue between India and Bangladesh—have been long in the making, disrupting South Asia’s hydropolitics. These developments indicate that in the last three decades, the region has transformed geopolitically, ecologically, and economically, making existing arrangements and dispute resolution mechanisms for its transboundary river basins redundant. Furthermore, the discourse on storage infrastructure, such as dams, which remains central to respective national water security framing and critiqued for its ecological consequences, also remains highly polarised among the countries and various actors. This complex set of challenges has major implications for South Asia’s economy and resilience against emerging climate change risks and geopolitical imperatives.

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The transboundary nature of these challenges requires multilateral cooperation. However, in the current context, most South Asian nations have bilateral agreements over transboundary waters, and the region does not have a uniform convention governing these shared waters. In contrast, there has been an upswing in smaller regional groupings within the larger South Asian region, which have shown more promise in recent times. This evolving landscape raises a critical question: To what extent can global and regional platforms catalyse such transformations?

Regional vs. Global Approach in Managing South Asia’s River Systems

The securitisation of transboundary waters in recent years coincides with major global developments that put water high on the global and national political agenda—the most notable being the [2023 United Nations \(UN\) Water Conference](#) and its upcoming edition in [2026](#). The run-up to the 2023 Water Conference was further informed by the Conference of the Parties (COP) 27 in Egypt—the [first COP that included ‘water’ on its official agenda](#).

One of the primary objectives of the 2023 Conference was the midterm review of the Water Action Decade 2018-2028 brought in by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution to step up the focus and efforts on water-related goals and targets for the ambitious 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Agenda. In doing so, one of the goals of the Action Decade is to stimulate water cooperation and partnerships at multiple scales and strengthen the integrated management of water resources in accelerating the SDG 2030 Agenda.

While the 2023 Conference faced several criticisms for its lack of political clout, short duration to discuss matters as complex as water, and the [amorphous nature of voluntary commitments instead of any binding agreements](#), it does make an effort to acknowledge the centrality of transboundary water cooperation in realising multiple SDGs—especially the role of cooperation in Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and climate adaptation, and further to realise and scale up wide-ranging benefits to promote economic development that is not possible at the subnational or national scale.

Do Global Frameworks Offer Solutions to South Asian Countries?

The 2023 Conference, by and large, endorsed the crucial need for Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) and the adoption of framework laws such as the [Water Convention 1992](#) and [Watercourse Convention 1997](#) by the countries that could facilitate long-term productive cooperation over international watercourses. In contrast, as a follow-up to the UN Conference, the [SDG 6 Synthesis Report](#)

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and the way of engaging multilateral, sub-regional, national and economic cooperation (emphases), rather than looking to achieve a South Asia wide cooperation as a whole. Given the slow progress on many water-related targets in the region and the broad-based nature of mega conferences, it is pertinent to ask how such mega conferences help countries in realising their SDG targets, when most of the solutions do not reflect the required sensibilities for region-specific concerns. For example, the unique regional context of South Asia, where deep-seated cynicism exists regarding the capacity of nations to advance globally accepted water governance frameworks, such as the Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM) at a basin scale. IRBM, to a significant extent, requires a multilateral institutional framework, and such an arrangement for the region's river basins has remained far from reality.

Similarly, the universal applicability of international framework laws, notably the UN Watercourse Convention 1997, holds little relevance across South Asia. Each South Asian nation had a divergent stance during the voting on the Convention at the UNGA, and none has ratified or acceded to the instrument since then. Additionally, as argued by prominent scholars, the 'broad nature' of the Convention and the general guiding principle leave ample room for the countries to comprehend it in a variety of different ways, as was experienced during voting by the South Asian nations.

Besides the challenges associated with the applicability of globally accepted tools and framework laws in water management, experiences from past water conferences underline its limited strength to influence and orient national and regional policymaking in bridging incongruencies on other critical and contentious issues such as water availability and variability, the need for water storage structures/dams, and environmental risks emerging out of the shared watercourses. The case from India offers a perspective in this regard. There is a growing consensus among the Indian policymakers, strategic communities, and hydrocracy on the need for water storage and river-linking projects to respond to water resource challenges under extreme weather events. India's National Water Mission, one of the eight missions under the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), highlights the strategic importance of water storage projects for the long-term water security of India. Moreover, the scholarship alludes to the importance of facilitating water storage to augment dry season flow with the potential to ameliorate the discord between India and its eastern neighbours, such as Bangladesh, regarding the sharing of waters in the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) basin. Yet, large-scale water storage infrastructure attracts significant doubt from both state and non-state actors towards data on water availability and variability, as well as for its socio-environmental impact, impeding any meaningful dialogue at the national or regional level in finding a 'middle ground.'

Towards Meaningful Cooperation: Moving Beyond Rhetoric

Despite concerns raised about the broad nature of the UN Water Conference, it nonetheless steers important policy conversations. Besides elevating water to the highest political level, SDG remains a central framework for national and international development. Furthermore, there is a univocal acceptance that regional cooperation over water in South Asia will remain crucial in fulfilling many of the goals related to poverty alleviation, energy and water security, and climate resilience. What is required is to engage with the question of how global conferences could be structured for it to be more responsive towards region-specific concerns and, concomitantly, how the countries in the region will be able to leverage such a high-level platform to uptake lessons for their national and regional benefits.

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It, thus, becomes necessary to take a step back and locate meaningful ways in which water could be better leveraged for national and regional development in the South Asian context. Experience suggests that creative cooperation does exist in the region, the most visible being in the hydropower sector among the BBIN Initiative countries, with potential significant socio-economic implications. Yet, the difference in perception and framing of energy concerns vis-à-vis water restrains cooperative arrangements in other areas, and continues to suffer from deep mistrust among the South Asian nations.

The upcoming UN Water Conference in 2026 has proposed 'Water in Multilateral Processes' and 'Water for Cooperation' as critical thematic areas to be considered for deliberation. It aims to integrate water into the 'global, multilateral, and intergovernmental dialogues' and facilitate transboundary water cooperation. However, in doing so, it must acknowledge the necessity of a tailored response to the unique South Asian case for bringing the required transformation in the region's water governance. Additionally, individual countries, and their leadership too, should infuse the required political capital to leverage transboundary waters for their mutual economic gains and, in doing so, fulfil the mandate of the SDG Agenda 2030.

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