

4. Sawalkote Hydel Project – Environment

With Indus Waters Treaty on hold, Centre panel to weigh clearance for Sawalkote dam on Chenab this week. The 1,865 MW Sawalkote Hydel Project on the Chenab River is a strategic Indian energy initiative stalled due to pending environmental clearance. Its progress involves balancing India's energy needs, environmental safeguards, and diplomatic obligations with Pakistan under the Indus Waters Treaty.

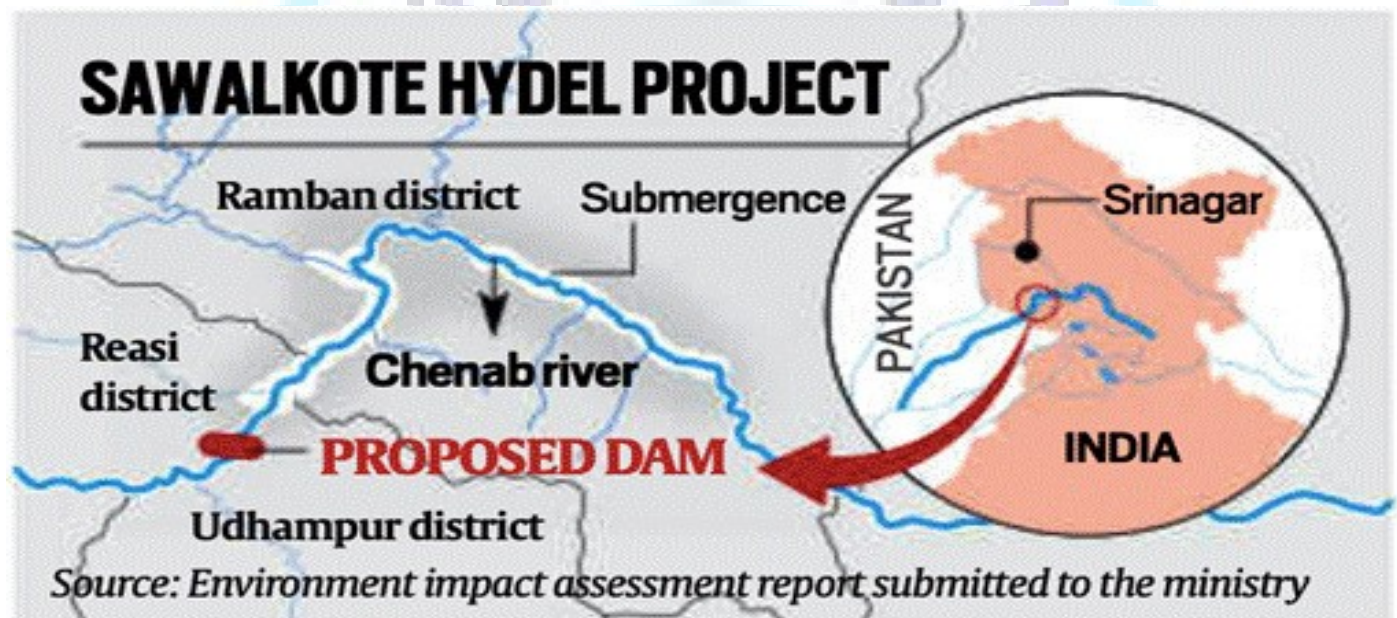
Project Overview – Sawalkote Hydel Project

Project Name – Sawalkote Hydel Project.

Capacity – 1,865 MW, making it one of India's largest hydropower projects.

River System – Located on the Chenab River in Jammu & Kashmir, which is part of the Indus river system and flows into Pakistan.

Current Status – The project is currently stalled. Its environmental clearance is under review by the Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) of the Ministry of Environment.



Geopolitical Context and the Indus Waters Treaty

The project's location on a river flowing into Pakistan places it directly within the framework of a crucial international treaty.

Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), 1960 – This is a bilateral water-sharing treaty between India and Pakistan, brokered by the World Bank. Under the treaty, India has full control over the eastern rivers (Ravi, Beas, Sutlej). India's use of the western rivers (Indus, Chenab, Jhelum) is restricted to non-consumptive purposes, such as run-of-the-river hydropower projects with limited storage.

Current Diplomatic Challenge – The treaty is currently in abeyance following the Pahalgam terror attack. This has heightened diplomatic sensitivities around any water-related projects on the western rivers, making the Sawalkote project a matter of careful strategic consideration.

Environmental & Regulatory Aspects

The project's progress is contingent on navigating India's environmental regulatory framework.

Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) – The EAC is a statutory body that reviews large infrastructure projects to ensure they comply with environmental regulations. It critically evaluates the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) reports submitted by project developers before recommending clearance.

Strategic Importance of the EAC Meeting – A positive recommendation from the EAC could unblock this massive, long-stalled project. The decision may also set a crucial precedent for the appraisal and clearance of other large hydropower projects planned on the western rivers in Jammu & Kashmir.

Strategic & Political Significance

For India, the project is not just about power generation but also a matter of national and strategic

priority.

Energy Security – With a capacity of **1,865 MW**, the project will significantly augment the power supply in Jammu & Kashmir and the wider northern Indian grid, enhancing energy security.

National Strategic Push – Following the Pahalgam attack, the project has been prioritized for both strategic and economic reasons. The government's intent for rapid implementation is evident from the multiple tenders that have already been floated for its construction.

Diplomatic Angle – Any development on the Chenab River requires careful and proactive diplomatic handling to avoid escalating tensions with Pakistan. The project's advancement could influence future Indo-Pak relations, negotiations regarding the IWT, and overall regional stability.

Technical and Design Considerations

Type and Location – It is a hydroelectric dam project located across the Udhampur, Reasi, and Ramban districts of Jammu & Kashmir.

Design Compliance – The project's design must strictly adhere to the run-of-the-river (RoR) restrictions stipulated under the Indus Waters Treaty. It requires robust and effective plans for environmental mitigation to address issues such as the impact of submergence, disruption to the local ecosystem, and river sediment management.

Broader Implications

The Sawalkote project has wide-ranging implications that extend beyond its immediate scope.

Water Diplomacy – As it is on a western river, the project is closely monitored by Pakistan under the IWT framework, making it a key element in bilateral water diplomacy.

Energy & Development – Hydropower projects like Sawalkote are crucial for India to meet its renewable energy targets and are also a significant source of local employment and development.

Environmental Concerns – The potential for adverse ecosystem impacts, displacement of communities, and changes to the river's ecology are significant concerns that must be addressed and mitigated.

Federal & Strategic Priority – The central government categorizes such large-scale infrastructure projects in border regions as national strategic assets.

Key Takeaways

The Sawalkote dam project is a complex issue situated at the intersection of energy development, environmental governance, and international diplomacy. The final decision on its clearance will involve a delicate balance between India's domestic energy needs, its international obligations under the Indus Waters Treaty, and critical environmental safeguards. The recommendation from the EAC holds the potential to unlock one of northern India's largest hydro projects, which will significantly shape the future of hydropower infrastructure in Jammu & Kashmir.

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