

CLIMATE CHANGE POSES MAJOR SECURITY THREAT TO PAKISTAN



With far-reaching consequences like food scarcity, climate change is a major security challenge and countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh can take lessons from the Arab Spring that was triggered by high food prices. Could Pakistan become destabilised because of climate change? Could the continuous cycles of floods and droughts result in food scarcity, leading to riots and possibly a revolution – like the Arab Spring triggered by high food prices caused by drought? Certainly in Tunisia and Syria, the consequences of climate change were stressors that ignited a volatile mix of underlying causes that erupted into revolution and experts say there are lessons for Pakistan to learn.

“Climate change is indeed a threat multiplier, exacerbating existing pressures as well as presenting new challenges to security in fragile societies,” explains Pakistan’s retired Lt Gen Tariq Waseem Ghazi from Pakistan, who now works for the Global Military Advisory Council on Climate Change (GMACC).

The GMACC was set up in 2009 as a global network of serving and retired military officers to highlight the potential security implications of a changing climate and to advocate action, including by the military, to minimise the risks.

“Today, we can’t discuss climate change without the military discussing it. Climate change is a growing worldwide threat to general peace and security,” says Ghazi, who was defence secretary to the government of Pakistan from 2005-2007.

Pakistan, which ranks tenth in 2014’s global index of fragile states, could learn from what happened during the Arab Spring, he says. That spring, he adds, has now turned into an “Arab Winter” with the destabilisation of states like Libya and Syria.

“70% of nations in the world today, including Pakistan, state that climate change is now a national security issue. Pakistan’s government even came up with a comprehensive National Climate Change Policy (NCCP) but now Pakistan is bucking the trend,” Ghazi says.

The NCCP laid down all the benchmarks when it was launched in 2013 but there is still no national action plan to implement the policy. Says retired ambassador and climate change expert Shafqat Kakakhel: “The NCCP must be taken up by various government departments. Climate change must not be treated as a sectoral issue. It is a multi-dimensional topic and an overarching institutional framework is needed for both policymaking and implementation.”

Struggling food production

The Pakistan government, headed by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, is ignoring the threat of climate change at its own peril, say experts. The country is just about self sufficient in food production (although there are distribution problems); but in the near future the rate of increase in food production will not be able to keep pace with the surge in population.

Pakistan will need more water to grow more food and the country will need to increase crop yields as well. According to Qamar-uz-Zaman Chaudhry, former Director General of the Pakistan Meteorology Department and a top climate change expert in Pakistan, “both are difficult prospects given the negative impacts of climate change in the country which are affecting both water availability and crop yields”.

The last four years of monsoons and floods have also had a long-term impact on farmers’ ability to produce food. Hence, Pakistan faces a great challenge in continuing to feed itself. In a country — ruled directly or indirectly by the army for much of the seven odd decades since it was formed in 1947 — this is a matter of huge concern for not only the civilian government but the military as well.

“There have been no discussions about the link between climate change and the military in larger forums,” says Ghazi. Now, GMACC along with the Institute for Environmental Security and the University of Cambridge have prepared a short paper ‘Climate Change: Implications for Defence’ based on key findings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

This defence briefing pulls together disparate parts of the IPCC’s Fifth Assessment Report into an easily readable document. It details security related climate change impacts like the projected increase in drought and flooding, sea level rise and extreme weather.

It describes how the military can respond to these impacts by relocating military bases and providing medical support and humanitarian operations during disasters. Resilience strategies include planning for displacement, disaster risk reduction and flexible response by the military.

“The operational responsibilities of the sector could also expand in the event of large scale climate driven disasters,” it states. There is also a section on reducing the “carbon footprint” of defence forces by using more efficient vehicles and alternative fuels.

The flyer was handed out at a meeting in Islamabad hosted by the Heinrich Boll Foundation in December. The gathering was addressed by Ghazi in Islamabad along with his Bangladeshi colleague retired Major General Munir Muniruzzaman, who is currently the GMACC chairperson.

The very next day, the same talk was given to serving Pakistani military officers at the National Defence University (NDU), a clear sign that the Pakistan military is waking up to the threat of climate change to national security.

The discussion at NDU — Pakistan’s top war college, which trains almost the entire leadership of the military in national security and strategic studies and also serves as a national think tank — noted that the primary purpose of military forces is to maintain peace and national security.

In this context, peace means not just the absence of war but the maintenance of stable conditions that provide at minimum for people's basic needs, which will become all the more difficult due to climate change impacts. The NDU's academic staff stated plans to do more research on the military challenges posed by climate change.

According to Qamar-uz-Zaman Chaudhry, who is the lead author of Pakistan's National Climate Change Policy and panellist at NDU, "It is good that Pakistan's military is becoming aware of climate change threats; they are among the main stakeholders in the country when it comes to climate change challenges emerging in relation to national security... we are already seeing the signs around the world. There is no doubt in my mind that climate change will become a major security challenge."

Last year, the US Department of Defence published a report stating climate change will exacerbate global instability, posing an immediate threat to national security.

Unlike Pakistan, Bangladesh has mainstreamed climate change into national policy. Bangladesh has standard operating procedures for disaster risk reduction right down to the district level, with FM radios advising people about flooding. People know exactly where to run to for safety when a disaster is imminent.

However, for Muniruzzam the potential threat for violent conflict in his country due to climate change is clear. "We in Bangladesh not only face natural disasters but also the threat of migration caused by the sea engulfing low lying coastal areas. In fact, the riskiest place to live is in the low elevation coastal zones of Bangladesh.

Border conflicts

"Around 35-40 million climate refugees are projected as the sea level rises. As numbers increase, there will be transboundary migration as well and the large scale migration will cause a massive problem as India has unilaterally fenced the border."

India has recently completed a 2,000 km fence along the border with Bangladesh to keep out immigrants. To police the border, India's Border Security Force has carried out a shoot-to-kill policy. It is estimated that Indian security forces have killed almost 1,000 Bangladeshis in 10 years.

In Muniruzzam's view, future climate refugees will probably be shot for trying to cross over into India as Bangladesh, one of the most densely populated countries in the world, will not be able to absorb so many refugees into its overcrowded towns and cities.

For both Ghazi and Muniruzzam, climate change is now an issue that has to be included in national security planning. As Ghazi says: "Reports indicate that in the last two decades since the world came together (at the Rio Earth Summit) in 1992, both our lives and the climate has changed for the worst. We are remaking the planet and begging to suffer the consequences".

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