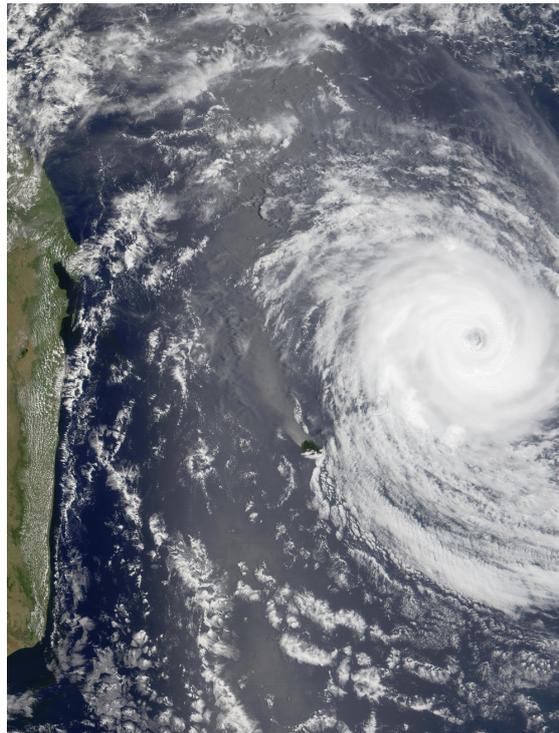


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Why Climate Security Should Matter to India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

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Powerful Tropical Cyclone Dina buffeting Mauritius and Réunion off eastern Madagascar at about 222 km per hour, 2002. Ocean warming will increase cyclone intensity. *The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.*

SYNOPSIS

India has so far been reluctant to link climate change with security at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Nonetheless, the worsening climate vulnerabilities

in India and its neighbourhood have prompted the country to play a more proactive role in the global and regional climate order, and led to some efforts to integrate climate change into its security and defence-related policies.

COMMENTARY

Climate change-influenced extreme precipitation events pose major security risks to India and other countries in South Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific. In October 2021 alone, more than 100 people have (so far) died due to flash floods in the states of [Kerala and Uttarakhand](#), and many are missing. These events affect the region's populations by threatening their physical, food, water, health and livelihood securities. They also erode developmental gains and reduce government capacity at national, state and local levels to respond to climate-related disasters, with their frequency and intensity having increased over the past decade. Furthermore, the demand on the region's militaries (particularly India's) to engage in more humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations has risen. Therefore, climate change has indeed become part of India's security and defence-related policies.

However, climate security policies are yet to be streamlined and institutionalised in accordance with the changing realities of the region, particularly in the Indian foreign policy domain. The [Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis](#) report released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in August 2021 estimates that climate change will have severe effects in South Asia and the broader Indian Ocean region, and particularly in the Hindu Kush-Himalaya (HKH) region — including sea-level rise, tropical cyclones, floods, heatwaves, uncertain precipitation patterns and glacial melting. Hence, there is a need for India to step up and address climate security risks — bilaterally as well as regionally.

Transboundary Climate Security Risks Affecting India

Most of the climate security risks in the region cut across national boundaries. The concerns regarding the impacts of climate change on human security are largely common to all countries, barring certain contextual differences. Tropical cyclones in the Bay of Bengal region affect mainly India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. The retreat of glaciers and reduction in snow cover in the HKH region affect most of the rivers that originate there — including Indus, Brahmaputra and Ganges. Climate change has adversely disrupted the monsoons as well, which also influences water levels in these transboundary rivers. As a case in point, since most of the countries in the region have large agricultural sectors that are dependent on these rivers, climate change does not just affect food security but also creates ripple effects such as loss of livelihoods among the agricultural communities, and rural-to-urban migration.

What is equally important to emphasise here is that many existing conflict dynamics in the region intersect with climate change. For instance, India and Pakistan, or India and China, have had longstanding border disputes, recurring military tensions or conflicts, and other geopolitical rivalries. Although India and Pakistan have signed the [Indus Waters Treaty \(IWT\)](#), tensions persist over water sharing, dam construction, etc. A decrease in water levels in River Indus due to a changing climate is likely to complicate India-Pakistan hydro-relations.

Besides having to undertake HADR operations, climate change has other implications for the region's militaries. Here again, the climate vulnerabilities of the militarised borderlands in the HKH region present a new set of challenges to the militaries, as do the climate vulnerabilities of coastal areas and island territories. For instance, retreating glaciers and snow/ice cover in the HKH region are forcing the Indian military to re-evaluate deployment procedures, such as in the [Siachen glacier](#), the world's highest battleground. Similarly, naval infrastructure is threatened by sea-level rise, cyclones, storm surges and other extreme weather events.

Addressing Climate Security Risks in India's Neighbourhood

While India has made huge strides in climate action in the past decade or so, the security implications of climate change are yet to be integrated into its national security discourses. Since India does not have a formalised national security strategy, it is particularly difficult to decipher the importance given to this issue in the national security domain. While countries such as Bangladesh and the Maldives treat climate change as a security threat due to its immediacy and existential relevance, India has been reluctant to express climate change in security terms.

At the UNSC, where India is currently a non-permanent member, India's representatives have, for various reasons, [repeatedly opposed the introduction of climate security](#) as a topic for discussion. These reasons include the lack of scientific consensus on the climate-conflict nexus, the unrepresentative nature of the UNSC, apprehensions over the undermining of equity and climate justice (specifically the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities, or CBDR-RC, which is enshrined in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), and concerns that the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle might be invoked in the name of climate security, especially in conflict settings, which could legitimise military or other forms of intervention in states.

At the regional level, organisations such as the [South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation \(SAARC\)](#), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) deal with climate change more in terms of developing early warning systems for climate disasters and risk reduction strategies, as well as discussing the impacts on development priorities. Yet these efforts are not comprehensive enough, and have not been sustained for long due to the low level of regional integration, geopolitical contestations, the lack of financial and technological resources, and other shortcomings. At the same time, issues such as interstate climate migration are yet to be addressed due to the political connotations attached to population movements in the region. In any case, there is an urgent need to reinvigorate mechanisms such as the SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change, which was launched in 2008 but is lying dormant.

In disasters, militaries often engage in HADR exercises — such as those under the auspices of the [Indian Ocean Naval Symposium \(IONS\)](#), led largely by the Indian navy. The Indian armed forces have begun to work towards both climate mitigation and adaptation to some degree. The [Joint Doctrine Indian Armed Forces \(JDIAF\)](#), released in 2017, explicitly mentions environmental and climate change as a threat to India's national security. Yet there are several hurdles to the institutionalisation of climate action within the Indian military, such as the state of [civil-military](#) relations, problems

related to budgetary allocation, organisational dynamics within the military, and bureaucratic politics.

Climate Security and India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

India's climate cooperation with countries in the Indo-Pacific region is on the rise, which is also reflective of its growing stature in the global climate order. While [India-Japan climate cooperation](#) (renewable energy, sustainability technologies, etc.) has strengthened over the years, India has also expanded the scope of climate cooperation with countries in Southeast Asia and Oceania. India has funded the development of a [climate early warning system](#), initiated the International Solar Alliance or ISA (a coalition of solar-rich countries between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn aimed at addressing their special energy needs), and contributed to HADR exercises and capacity-building in other aspects in the Indo-Pacific.

Climate security is critical to the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. With India's growing interest and influence in the affairs of the Indo-Pacific through frameworks such as the [Quad](#) (involving the United States, Japan, Australia and India) and potentially an expanded Quad Plus, climate action will feature prominently in India's Indo-Pacific agenda. India's multilateral approach to climate diplomacy has opened up various opportunities — including the ISA, which could advance energy transition, and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), yet another forum launched by India, which could potentially promote the climate resilience of communities and infrastructures in the region.

Most importantly, India needs to [recalibrate its positions on climate security](#) without necessarily linking it to UNSC debates. A step forward for the Indian foreign policy and defence establishment would be to conduct a comprehensive security risk assessment that takes climate change into consideration. This could then consolidate its cooperation with the other countries of South Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region.

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