

Report

Climate Security in the Bay of Bengal

Garima Maheshwari

*Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), New Delhi and the Netherlands
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*Authors: Angshuman Choudhury, Siddharth Anil Nair, Ashutosh Nagda and
Garima Maheshwari; January 2022*

The relationship between climate change and conflict is complex and the security implications are not always easily visible as they are bundled with other causal factors. This new report on 'Climate Security in the Bay of Bengal',¹ which examines how climate threats interact with conflict and security in the region, therefore, is a welcome contribution to the sparse discourse on this challenging theme. The study focuses on the impacts of climate change on transnational and intra-country conflict fault lines, as well as strategic and military dynamics in the region.

The report authored by Indian and Dutch scholars is the result of a joint project and was published in January 2022. This special report emerged from the year-long project on climate security, conceptualized by the New Delhi based think tank Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies in partnership with the Clingendael Institute and Planetary Security Initiative in the Netherlands. The report was formulated over the course of 2021-22 through expert interviews, third-party data sets and secondary research.

Dr. Garima Maheshwari is an Assistant Professor at the Vivekananda Law School, Vivekananda Institute of Professional Studies (affiliated with Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University), New Delhi. She is also a Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi.

Principal Findings

The principal conclusions and recommendations of the report emphasise the need for wider cooperation on climate change at the regional level and specific forms of regional security cooperation with linkages to shared climate threats. These forms of cooperation also need to be interlinked with domestic climate policies in regional countries as they engage with the climate-security paradigm. The report makes the following preliminary recommendations:

First, create a 'climate security working group' (CSWG) within BIMSTEC's 'Climate Change' vertical to facilitate regional knowledge-building and sharing, which will act in tandem with the BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate (BCWC), BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs Meeting (BNSC), and the yet-to-be-established Track 1.5 BIMSTEC Security Dialogue Forum (BSDF).

Second, countries should develop a framework to acknowledge and address climate-induced distress migration across and within international borders.

Third, create a multi-agency Bay of Bengal task force to develop shared information-gathering and operational capacities to deal with adverse weather events. It needs to comprise of representatives from relevant disaster management ministries/departments and defence forces, and sectoral experts.

Fourth, climate security-centric norms and practices need to be incorporated into military doctrines and operational modules. This includes mapping vulnerable domestic hotspots and conflict drivers, developing climate-sensitive technologies and defence equipment, mainstreaming climate change in military intelligence, and allocating funds within the defence budget for climate risk mitigation activities.

Fifth, countries should expand the scope of their national climate policies from short-term response to long-term adaptation. This includes building community-level resilience and public-private governance.

Sixth, the mandate of the SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) could be expanded or suitably adapted to monitor at-risk population groups and assets, and provide both short-term early warning data and long-term granular data on adverse climate events for regional adaptation and mitigation in the Bay of Bengal. There has been progress in this direction. The BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting held in Dhaka, in

December 2005 had added Environment and Disaster Management as one of the priority areas for regional cooperation. The BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate (BCWC) based in India is fully functional and has state-of-the-art facilities to provide Disaster Early Warning to the member states.

Climate Security in Regional Policy Frameworks

Climate security forms an important emergent framework for examining how climate change can compound existing institutional, environmental, economic, cultural, and social stressors and their associated security risks. The framework encompasses the scope of security in both traditional as well as non-traditional types. It has evolved from a focus on environmentally-induced internal conflicts to wider conceptions of security that emphasise a broadening of the framework—from state to human security—through the lens of climate change.

The Bay of Bengal region forms an important flashpoint in terms of climate vulnerability and its associated risks and has also gained increased geopolitical significance in the light of the emerging discourses on the Indo-Pacific. The Bay of Bengal region is exposed to a number of extreme weather events triggered and accelerated by climate change, with increasing levels of hydrological, cyclonic, and drought events-- both inland and along the coasts of the countries. As per the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), sea surface temperature in the Indian ocean is likely to increase by 1 to 2 degrees Celsius if global warming rises by 1.5°C to 2°C. With an average Sea level Rise (SLR) rate of approximately 5 cm per decade, rising sea surface temperatures and increasing cyclonic activity, the Bay of Bengal region is vulnerable to adverse climatic as well as local environmental impacts, such as marine pollution, loss of forests, etc.

In addition to these environmental and climate-induced challenges, the Bay of Bengal region is also a fertile home to geopolitics and socio-economic challenges with cross-border fallouts. It has witnessed rapid securitisation, characterized by an intensification of major power competition, and rising socio-political tensions. Combined with indirect climate-induced risks, this securitisation makes the region particularly sensitive to the climate-security nexus. The scope of the report covers some parts of the Bay of Bengal region, spanning eastern India, Bangladesh, western Myanmar, northern and eastern Sri Lanka, and north-western Indonesia.

Growing Significance of Climate Security

The Bay of Bengal region has become a hotspot for climate security on three main counts:

First, it has become a space for increasing power politics, maritime disputes, contests for natural resources, and historical mistrust, etc. These contestations have a likelihood of escalating in the event of climate change, wherein changes in temperature and precipitation patterns may lead to conflict over resources such as water.

Second, gradual and sudden disaster events – as a result of climate change – can threaten a variety of strategic assets and combat readiness of the military, military infrastructure, etc. It can also threaten public infrastructure that provide basic amenities and connectivity through long-term changes in weather patterns.

Third, climate change events may exacerbate conflicts over the region's natural resources among communities, states and social groups. Such violent resource conflicts, combined with sea-level rise, can also lead to internal as well as cross-border migration patterns and displacement, as witnessed in the case of Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and parts of India. These could take the form of coercive as well as non-coercive migration.

Climate Security as Human Security

The report makes the case that while there are identifiable links between climate threats and conflict in the Bay of Bengal, these links are not causal but flow through intermediate conflict factors. This lack of direct causality, combined with geopolitical considerations, has shaped the discourse of climate security within the policy makers of countries in this region. Thus, while climate change is a key threat to the region, efforts to address it have occurred in a way that makes a unique departure from the traditional 'climate security' framework. Regional countries – including India – have conceived of the climate-security nexus more in terms of developmental and human security challenges posed by climate change and less in terms of traditional security risks. Most of the regional countries have resisted the effort to place climate change on the agenda of the United Nations Security Council, as the securitisation of this issue would fundamentally alter the course of global climate politics. It is felt that the climate security framework – even though it incentivizes climate action by bringing home the

urgency of the issue – dilutes the idea of climate justice which involves global collective action on burden-sharing, in accordance with historical responsibility for emissions and equity in terms of per capita emissions.

Such an approach has ensured that the imperative of climate security has found, at best, camouflaged reference in climate policy frameworks, and is largely seen through the lens of human and developmental security. Unfortunately, regional cooperative forums – primarily the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) – have so far made only limited progress on the issue of climate change. However, there are pathways to open up discussion on climate security without necessarily adhering to the security framework of the developed countries. These can occur through regional and bilateral cooperation. Regional-level cooperation over climate security circumvents Western dominance in the international climate debate and is distinct from the thrust of global climate negotiations. This can pave the way for the development of a relatively original eastern construct of climate security.

Investigating such an alternative framework is essential not only for a more robust and diverse exploration of the idea of climate security but also provides space for productive operational policy recommendations within regional contexts. Forums such as the BIMSTEC can contribute to such regional cooperation by expanding their scope of institutional cooperation in this area, undertaking cooperative basic functional operations related to weather-related anomalies and also developing domestic policy frames in this domain.

Reference

1. Choudhury, Angshuman, Siddharth Anil Nair, Ashutosh Nagda, and Garima Maheshwari. "Climate Security in the Bay of Bengal." IPCS-Clingendael Institute Special Report # 212, January 2022. https://www.planetarysecurityinitiative.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/Climate_Security_in_the_Bay_of_Bengal_3eproef.pdf.