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The Security Implications of the Pakistan Floods

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INTRODUCTION

The tragedy unfolding in Pakistan in the wake of unprecedented flooding late last month, which has inundated a third of the country and displaced millions of people, is not only a humanitarian catastrophe but also poses significant security threats. Already before the floods, South Asia experienced record breaking heat waves in April and May,¹ leading to unbearable living conditions, widespread energy blackouts, and rapid glacial melt.

These climate hazards will compound existing challenges in the country, including political instability, Islamic extremism, and nuclear security. Given these dynamics, efforts to address the immediate humanitarian crisis as well as develop longer-term climate adaptation and resilience measures are not just the right thing for Western countries to do—such investments will also provide security benefits as they contribute to a more stable Pakistan in the future. In particular, the United States must live up to its climate finance commitments, and better integrate climate considerations into the range of engagements it has with Pakistan, including ongoing military training and support.

¹ Usaid Siddiqui, “‘Perfect Climate Storm’: Pakistan Reels from Extreme Heat,” *Climate Crisis News*, May 21, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/21/hold-heatwave-in-pakistan-and-climate-change>.

HUMAN SECURITY AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY

The direct impacts of the flooding on food, health, and other human security dimensions for Pakistanis are tremendous. Two million acres of agricultural land have been inundated,² and food prices are soaring.³ The damage will also affect crops not yet planted, such as winter wheat, and comes on top of a global food crisis already straining supplies for many countries. The World Health Organization (WHO) has determined the situation is a “grade 3” emergency—its highest designation, citing the damage to more than 900 health facilities, and increased risks of dengue fever, malaria, polio and COVID-19.⁴ Women and children bear the brunt of these risks; there are an estimated 650,000 pregnant women in flood-affected provinces,⁵ and Sindh Province, which has been severely affected by the floods, already had very high rates of malnutrition and stunting among children.⁶ Of course, all of these challenges are exacerbated by the floods’ catastrophic damage to critical infrastructure including railways, roads, bridges, hospitals, and schools.

Climate change is not the only factor driving the crisis. As Michael Kugelman outlined in *Foreign Policy*, poor ecological governance and environmental degradation are also to blame.⁷ He notes that deforestation, unregulated construction along waterways, and poor drainage systems made the flooding worse. Jumaina Siddiqui, a South Asia expert at the U.S. Institute of Peace, explains further that the country’s flood response plans lacked the technical expertise and detail required to address such a crisis.⁸

Additionally, the country has faced government turbulence for years, with no prime minister in its 75-year history completing a full term in office, undermining its ability to fully prepare for such a disaster. Earlier this year, the 2022 Fragile States Index ranked Pakistan in the high “warning” zone, with its scores on indicators such as economic inequality and provision of public services dropping over the past year. The strain of the current crisis on top of already limited governance capacity and the distraction of a political conflict between the current government and former Prime Minister Imran Khan risks tipping the country into further instability.

- 2 Syed Raza Hassan and Asif Shahzad, “Pakistan Tries to Avert Lake Overflow amid Floods; UN Warns of More Misery,” *Reuters*, September 6, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/flood-hit-pakistan-works-prevent-overflow-biggest-lake-2022-09-06/>.
- 3 Deutsche Welle (www.dw.com), “Pakistan: Food Prices Soar amid Floods,” *DW.com*, August 30, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-food-prices-soar-amid-floods/a-62967557>.
- 4 “Pakistan: Who Warns of Significant Health Risks as Floods Continue | *UN News*, August 31, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/08/1125872>.
- 5 “Pakistan Floods: Women and Girls Most at Risk as Recovery Predicted to Take Years,” CARE International, September 1, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/women-and-girls-most-risk-pakistan-floods-create-humanitarian-crisis-warns-care>.
- 6 “Highlights of Malnutrition in Sindh Province,” Policy Brief, The World Bank, August 31, 2022, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099720508312234584/pdf/P17855409c8ba400f0a8890d19f317c5fe7.pdf>.
- 7 Michael Kugelman, “How Bad Governance Exacerbated Pakistan’s Flooding,” *Foreign Policy*, September 1, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/01/pakistan-flooding-crisis-climate-change-governance>.
- 8 Jumaina Siddiqi, “Amid Devastating Floods, Pakistan’s Leaders Must Learn from the Past to Avoid Future Mistakes,” *Just Security*, September 2, 2022, <https://www.justsecurity.org/82928/amid-devastating-floods-pakistans-leaders-must-learn-from-the-past-to-avoid-future-mistakes/>.

EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM

The ongoing crisis also offers an opportunity for extremist and terrorist groups to capitalize on the government and international community's struggle to respond to the scale of the crisis. In the wake of the 2010 floods in Pakistan, which were less intense but also displaced millions, the Pakistani Taliban provided aid⁹ to local communities and called the presence of foreign humanitarian workers "unacceptable."¹⁰ At the time, reports indicated that Taliban-provided aid was delivered with the message, "Don't trust the government and its western allies."¹¹ The humanitarian arm of militant extremist group Lashkar-e-Taiba also claimed to have more than 2000 members working for flood relief during the 2010 crisis.¹²

Similar dynamics are likely to emerge in the coming months. One of the provinces most affected by today's floods, Balochistan, has seen an uptick in recruiting efforts in recent years by Islamic State Khorasan,¹³ a group that emerged in 2015 in the Af-Pak region. Multiple news reports have cited complaints from displaced people that the government has been absent and unable to help them, potentially opening the door for extremist groups to step in and provide aid.^{14, 15}

NUCLEAR DYNAMICS

Pakistan's complex climate and nuclear intersections present additional security pathways to consider. Although the country's multiple nuclear energy sites—financed by China—were not directly impacted by this most recent flooding disaster, as climate change becomes more severe, it is increasingly likely that nuclear sites will be at risk. Extreme heat, flooding, and political instability may affect the safety and security of nuclear reactors. Therefore, it is critical to bolster operation standards to prevent future security crises—especially as energy demand continues to skyrocket.

9 International Military Council on Climate and Security, "Climate Security and the Strategic Energy Pathway in South Asia," Council on Strategic Risks, February 2021, https://imccs.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Climate-Security-and-the-Strategic-Energy-Pathway-in-SOUTH-Asia_February-2021.pdf

10 Salman Masood, "In Pakistan, Taliban Hint at Attacks on Relief Workers," *The New York Times*, August 26, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/27/world/asia/27pstan.html>.

11 Kai Küstner, "Pakistani Taliban Try to Benefit from Floods" *DW.com*, November 8, 2010, <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistani-taliban-try-to-benefit-from-floods/a-5891119>.

12 Saeed Shah, "Pakistan Floods: Islamic Fundamentalists Fill State Aid Void," *The Guardian*, August 3, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/aug/03/islamist-groups-pakistan-aid-void>.

13 Kristina Hummel, "Extremism and Terrorism Trends in Pakistan: Changing Dynamics and New Challenges," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, March 21, 2022, <https://ctc.usma.edu/extremism-and-terrorism-trends-in-pakistan-changing-dynamics-and-new-challenges/>.

14 Haq Nawaz Khan and Susannah George, "No One Is Caring for Us': Pakistanis Struggle for Survival after Floods," *The Washington Post*, September 5, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/09/05/pakistan-floods-refugees-camps/>.

15 Max Bearak, Raymond Zhong, and Ihsanullah Tipu Mehsud, "Deadly Floods Devastate an Already Fragile Pakistan," *The New York Times*, August 29, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/29/climate/pakistan-floods-monsoon.html>.

At the same time, Pakistan is a nuclear weapons possessing state—as CSR has investigated, climate change and nuclear weapons are a destabilizing combination.¹⁶ As is the case at the moment, disasters can overwhelm governance capabilities, strain resiliency, exacerbate vulnerabilities, and in a worst case scenario “lead to higher chances of (miscalculated or intentional) conflict escalation, including among nuclear powers.”¹⁷

This consideration is especially true for this region. Historical tensions—centered on territorial disputes—frequently intensify between nuclear armed neighbors India and Pakistan, and oftentimes involve freshwater rhetoric due to the shared Indus River Basin. In the future, climate impacts such as catastrophic flooding due to extreme precipitation events and rapid glacial melt could intersect with an ongoing geopolitical skirmish between both nations—exacerbating fears of water manipulation and ultimately raising nuclear threat levels.

THE U.S. ROLE GOING FORWARD

The United States has a critical role to play in responding to this crisis, not only because it’s the right thing to do—as the Pakistani government has pointed out, its greenhouse gas emissions are very small compared to those of the U.S. and other developed countries—but also because it is in U.S. national security interests.¹⁸

The U.S. response should focus on both Pakistan’s immediate humanitarian needs as well as the longer-term security risks that arise from such climate hazards. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Department of Defense (DoD) are already coordinating to provide emergency relief supplies, and this coordination should continue past the immediate crisis to longer-term investments in Pakistan’s own indigenous response capacity.¹⁹ The Department of Defense has provided millions of dollars in military aid and training over the years to the Pakistan military, which is leading the country’s crisis response—more regularly integrating climate disaster response considerations into such programs makes sense going forward.

Additionally, the U.S. must live up to its climate financing commitments and robustly fund programs like the President’s Emergency Plan for Adaptation and Resilience (PREPARE) initiative, which is designed to, “support developing countries and communities in vulnerable situations around the world in their efforts to adapt to and manage the impacts of climate change.” Making bold investments today in resilience and adaptation programs in the countries most vulnerable to climate hazards will pay security dividends for both those countries and the United States in the years to come.

16 Sarang Shidore, “Climate Change and the India-Pakistan Rivalry,” Briefer, Council on Strategic Risks, January 23, 2020, <https://councilonstrategicrisks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ShidoreJan23ClimatePakistan.pdf>.

17 Andrea Rezzonico and Christine Parthemore, “The Future of South Asia: Nuclear, Climate & Security Nexus in India & Pakistan,” Council on Strategic Risks, March 7, 2019, <https://councilonstrategicrisks.org/2019/03/07/the-future-of-south-asia-nuclear-climate-security-nexus-in-india-pakistan/>.

18 Fadel Allassan, “Pakistan Minister Wants Rich Nations to Pay Countries Facing Climate Disasters,” *Axios*, September 4, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/09/04/climate-change-reparations-pakistan>.

19 USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, Twitter Post, September 9, 2022, 8:09 AM, <https://twitter.com/USAIDSavesLives/status/1568209922134769664>.

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