

## In the line of fire: The climate threat to global security

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### Abstract

Climate change, increasingly being called the climate crisis, is arguably the greatest threat to human life as we know it. Across regions in the world, people are experiencing the most adverse impacts of this crisis in the form of more frequent and more intense climate extremes like heatwaves, droughts, floods, landslides, cyclones, wildfires, crop loss and water scarcity, among others. As per latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) data, the crisis is only going to intensify in the coming decades making populations even more vulnerable to climate extremes and causing large scale disruption of natural and human systems. Thus, the ongoing climate crisis will threaten human security, and by extension, global security like never before, exacerbating ongoing conflicts through an explosive interplay between pre-existing fault lines in societies. This article tries to situate climate change in the current global security discourse through an analysis of the relationship between climate and conflict. It also attempts a reappraisal of traditional security discourse, particularly in developing countries like India, which are facing some of the worst modern-day impacts of extreme climate events. The article concludes that the global security discourse, policies, and as well as interventions to tackle armed conflicts need to be restructured to accommodate for the effect of climate change on conflicts.

### Introduction

On 1 May 2019, Masood Azhar was designated a terrorist by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 and 1989 after almost a decade of efforts by India (BBC, 2019). These efforts had the backing of unprecedented diplomatic muscle employed by the US, UK and France to counter China's "technical hold" on the designation. Of course, the scourge of global terrorism requires such extraordinary measures on part of the major powers. More so at a time when terrorism has taken multiple hues and forms as evident during the New Zealand

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Mosque attack and the Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka. However, when it comes to global security, there is one threat that has not seen similar extraordinary measures despite being quite possibly the greatest threat to human life on Earth.

On the day of Masood Azhar's listing, another important declaration was made with arguably more far-reaching implications, for the world and for countries like India. That day the UK Parliament declared an 'environment and climate emergency' (Cowburn, 2019). Although it was a motion of a non-binding nature and not a state of emergency that would give the government powers to take extraordinary measures through legislation, it was nonetheless historic. Jeremy Corbyn, leader of UK's Labour Party said while introducing the motion, 'we are living in a climate crisis that will spiral dangerously out of control unless we take rapid and dramatic action now [...] this is no longer about the distant future' (Cowburn, 2019). On 9 May, the Republic of Ireland followed suit and declared its own climate and biodiversity emergency.

Although these declarations are largely symbolic, could a case be made for an actual state of emergency over our climate? Is it really no longer about the distant future? Moreover, if climate change threatens human security, then where does it feature in the current security discourse? More importantly, why aren't countries like India, which are actually facing some of the worst present-day impacts of climate change, declaring such an emergency?

### The climate crisis

Climate change, to put it mildly, is upon us. Gone are the days when scientists used to talk about climate change in the future tense. In the words of the Swedish teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg, it is high time we call it a 'climate crisis' (Thunberg, 2019). We are currently living in the Earth's sixth mass extinction. While all five of Earth's earlier mass extinctions, periods of geological history when over 75% of the planet's species die off, were caused by natural changes, the current extinction is a result of human impact on the environment (The Week, 2019). As per study conducted by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the number of animals has gone down 50% in the last four decades (WWF, 2014). The four warmest years in recorded history have been the years 2015-2018. In fact, the year 2016 was the warmest ever, and 2018 the fourth warmest year on record. All over the world, extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and intense than ever before. The Global Risks Report 2019, released by the World Economic Forum, named 'extreme weather' as the risk of greatest concern in terms of likelihood (World Economic Forum, 2019).

The summer of 2018 saw abnormally high temperatures of between 25 and 30 degrees Celsius in the Arctic Circle and a prolonged heatwave and drought in Northern and Western Europe, causing at least 1600 human casualties (WMO, 2019). Japan experienced wild weather when first in late June and early July, extreme rainfall caused destructive flooding that killed at least 230 people and destroyed almost 7000 houses, and then in late July and early August temperature crossed a record high of over 41 degrees Celsius causing at least 150 deaths (WMO, 2019). The US saw its deadliest wildfire ever in the Camp Fire in California in November 2018 that burned more than 62,000 hectares causing at least 85 deaths and losses worth \$16.5bn (Reyes-Velarde, 2019). The Indian state of Kerala saw its deadliest floods since 1924 in August 2018 due to extreme rainfall that was 96% above the

long-term average (WMO, 2019). As per the state government, 1/6<sup>th</sup> of the total population of Kerala was affected by the floods, i.e., an estimated 5.8 million people. More than 480 deaths and property losses of at least \$5-6 bn were reported (Rajiv, 2018). But all this is just a fraction of the havoc that the climate crisis is causing across the world at present and might cause in the near future. It is disrupting multiple systems like agriculture, water resources, economies, cities, health, livelihoods and more, all at once. These systems are essential for modern human society and their largescale disruption has the potential to cause population displacement, social upheaval and human conflict of an unprecedented level.

As per a Special Report released by the IPCC in 2018, given the current state of global carbon emissions, the world would be warmer by 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels sometime between 2030 and 2050 (IPCC, 2018). This would mean even more frequent and intense heatwaves, cyclones, floods, droughts, epidemics, crop losses, famines, loss of livelihoods and economic slowdown. For people in densely populated regions like South Asia, the future is expected to be unbearably hot. According to a 2017 study, if global emissions continue at their current rate, then by the late 21<sup>st</sup> century the ambient temperature in the Indo-Gangetic plains of South Asia will cross the standard wet-bulb temperature<sup>1</sup> of 35 degrees Celsius at which even the fittest humans cannot survive beyond a few hours (Im et al, 2017). A business-as-usual scenario of emissions would also mean faster melting of polar ice and resultant sea level rise that would pose an existential threat to major coastal cities like Dhaka, Mumbai, Hong Kong, Jakarta, Miami and New York apart from island nations like Mauritius, Maldives, Nauru and Papua New Guinea among others.

### Climate-induced conflicts

One of the most under-studied aspects of the climate crisis, however, is its potential to create conditions for conflicts, particularly civil wars. Yet, studies that have attempted to explore and quantify the relationship between climate and conflict suggest that declining rural incomes play a key connecting role between extreme climate events and risk of conflict (Detges, 2017). Research shows that the possibility of climate extremes leading to conflict, increases in regions where institutions are not as effective, there is widespread social exclusion and people lack access to essential services. Regions such as West Asia, Central Asia, East Africa and Southeast Asia are found to be at risk of security threats originating or spurred on because of extreme climate events (Detges, 2017). As researchers have not been able to establish a clear relationship between climate and conflict, many studies have concluded that climate change is a ‘threat-multiplier’ meaning that it exacerbates existing fault lines like rising economic inequality, social injustice, ethnic and religious divide, ongoing political upheaval and distress migration. The Syrian Civil War is a case in point.

The Syrian Civil War started in 2011 with the imprisonment and torture of a group of school boys by the Syrian secret police for painting anti-government graffiti in the predominantly Sunni Muslim city of Dara’a (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). The initially peaceful protests not only demanded the release of the boys but were also a statement against governmental apathy and corruption. Subsequent

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<sup>1</sup> Wet-bulb temperature is a combined measure of temperature and humidity. A higher wet bulb temperature means hotter and more humid conditions. When this measure crosses the standard limit of 35°C, the human body is not able to naturally cool itself down resulting in certain death if exposed for even a few hours.

government crackdown led to an armed uprising that spiralled into a war that has now claimed almost half a million lives and uprooted more than 11 million people. But unlike most modern-day conflicts, the Syrian uprising was preceded by a prolonged drought that started in 2007 (Nett and Ruttinger, 2016). Now known as the worst drought in Syria's recorded history, it caused massive crop failures and livestock deaths across rural Syria, thus destroying the only source of livelihood of farmers and herders. This led to massive internal migration of rural Syrians into already overcrowded urban centres like Aleppo, Damascus and Dara'a. The Assad government, that had already cut down fuel and food subsidies in 2008, failed to act on the needs of the drought-stricken populace that were now unemployed and disenfranchised (Nett and Ruttinger, 2016). All of this culminated in raging anti-government sentiments that simply needed a trigger.

### Implications for India

The Syrian Civil War clearly demonstrates the capability of extreme weather and climate events to increase the risk of social conflict by exacerbating existing socio-economic problems. This makes the current climate crisis a major security threat. In fact, in January 2019, the US Department of Defense released a report that called climate change a threat to national security (Capaccio et al., 2019). According to the Global Security Defense Index 2014, 70% of countries in the world consider climate change a national security concern (American Security Project, 2014). Interestingly though, India is not one of these countries as it still considers climate change a primarily environmental issue. That is even more concerning in the context of a recent report called the Global Climate Risk Index 2018 that named India as the 6<sup>th</sup> most affected country by climate-induced extreme events, where persistent droughts and heatwaves alone have affected over 330 million people (Eckstein et al., 2017). In addition to that, a recent World Bank report concluded that if current climate trends continue, then by 2050, an estimated 40 million people will be forced to internally migrate due to extreme climate events in South Asia (Rigaud et al., 2018). Climate-induced migration has the potential to intensify everyday struggle for resources across the region and consequently, aggravate social conflict.

Like Syria, there is a major farm crisis happening in India that has resulted in more than three hundred thousand farmer suicides during the last two decades and multiple farmers' agitations across its major states (BBC, 2018). The average annual farm household income in the country was 8931 rupees per month as per (National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development's (NABARD) rural financial inclusion survey (NABARD, 2018). That is one-tenth of the average per capita income of the country. With farmers getting crushed under increasing debts, government measures to "double farmers' income" seem unrealistic, or at best, inadequate. To add to that, India's Economic Survey 2017-2018 had concluded that in the long run, climate change might reduce Indian farmers' incomes by 20-25% (Government of India, 2018). Could India then see a social and political upheaval caused by extreme weather events on the lines of Syria? India, after all, is a tinderbox of religious, sectarian, caste, linguistic, regional and ethnic fault lines that have only deepened under the current dispensation that essentially thrives on such divisions. At this point, one can only speculate.

### Conclusion

The key takeaway here, thus, is that the ongoing climate crisis is arguably the greatest security threat to modern nation-states. India, being a developing country and lying in an ecologically sensitive and densely populated region like South Asia is at great risk from the impacts of climate extremes on social conflict.

Needless to say, efforts to limit the most adverse impacts of this crisis are required on a war footing. But radical measures require a realisation that the situation is grave enough to be considered an emergency or a crisis. However, the climate crisis is unlike any other issue we have faced. It has been called a post-normal issue, i.e. a high stakes issue which needs urgent decisions, yet is challenged by a high degree of uncertainty and debates (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993). Thus, we see that even when scientific data is informing us of an impending doom, our policymakers are busy negotiating legally non-binding frameworks like the Paris climate agreement and declaring symbolic climate emergencies.

What the world, and particularly India, needs right now is a radical change in the way the climate crisis is seen. As of now, international security discourse, policies and interventions to tackle armed conflicts do not take into account the compounding influence of a changing climate on such conflicts. Governments across the world need to acknowledge the malignant feedback loops that climate extremes can create to drive social unrest among vulnerable populations. Particularly, countries like India need to recognise climate security as integral to national security. India's security policy, thus, needs to be realigned and integrated with its climate policy so as to generate appropriate and urgent legislative responses.

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