



CLIMATE CHANGE IN SOUTH ASIA: CONFLICT OR COOPERATION OVER THE HIMALAYA?

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Summary

The South Asian region – in particular the glacier areas of the Himalaya – will be significantly affected by climate change. New assessments highlight future decreased availability of natural resources and increasing numbers and intensity of natural disasters as some of the main challenges, impacting health, migration, food and energy security, and water quality.

On 21 November, experts from India, Germany and the United States gathered to discuss the security implications of climate change for the region. The dialogue was organised by adelphi, the KlimaCampus Research Area “Climate Change and Security” (CLISEC) at the University of Hamburg, and the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy Hamburg (IFSH), supported by the German Federal Foreign Office. It was the fourth Climate Security Dialogue following events on the MENA region, Central Asia and South America (Andean region).

The dialogue highlighted the importance of bottom-up cooperation approaches, including Track II and knowledge sharing initiatives among community level actors. Preventative ‘disaster diplomacy’ was identified as an avenue that could be supported at sub-regional and regional levels, among others by Germany and the European Union.

Background

The South Asian region is in many respects a region of extremes. Despite only amounting to 2.4 percent of the world’s land surface area, it is home to 17 percent of the world’s population. Environmental changes have a considerable influence on the way in which water, food and energy supplies interrelate. The region also has high levels of poverty. As the glaciers shrink rapidly – a visible process that has already begun years ago –, this fine balance will be thrown further into flux and border regions in particular will be prone to tensions due to dwindling resources and migration trends. The negative effects on the population’s health form an additional challenge that requires special attention. Climate change will therefore significantly affect the region’s development chances.

Against this backdrop, the dialogue workshop aimed at finding answers especially to the following questions:

- Which conflict risks are emerging from climate change impacts on the Himalaya glaciers?
- What cooperation potentials are available to foster regional stability?
- How can Germany and other countries support mitigating security risks and promoting stability and cooperation?

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The Need for Climate Diplomacy

In his welcoming remarks Mr **Weert Börner**, Deputy Head of the “Climate and Environmental Foreign Policy, Sustainable Economy” Division of the German Federal Foreign Office (FFO), underlined the importance of moving the international climate discussion forward by finding innovative ways for diplomats to enhance cooperation between relevant actors in the field of climate policies and beyond. This climate diplomacy approach goes beyond the support of current and continuous climate change negotiations.



Mr Börner placed these activities in the context of the 2011 German initiative at the UN Security Council, addressing the implications of climate change on international security (see UN-SC Presidential Statement 2011/15). The current series of dialogues and conferences focusing on regional cooperation – bringing together civil society representatives, scientists, and policy makers – are part of this initiative as well. This 4th dialogue in the series of Climate Security Dialogues in Berlin helps to achieve the objectives of bridging the science-policy gap and promoting concrete cooperation at the regional level.

Mr **Jürgen Scheffran**, Head of the Research Group Climate Change and Security at the University of Hamburg, echoed the importance of addressing the topic of climate change and security in the Himalaya region – a source of many of the rivers in South Asia, where

impacts of climate change could potentially affect billions of people.



Climate Change in South Asia – Security, Water, and Energy

Mr **Uttam Sinha**, from the Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis in New Delhi, India, gave participants an overview of the climate change and security concerns in South Asia. The context he laid out for the Himalaya region was that of a water resource perspective, but where food, energy, and water are closely interlinked. Regarding the impacts of climate change in the region, the intensity of floods for instance stands out as one of the greatest challenges.

Indeed, the Himalaya region is most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, in particular due to the effects on wetlands. If these crucial elements of the overall regional ecosystem are damaged, a vital link in warning and protecting against floods is lost. Preserving these early warning systems is an important task for international cooperation, and Mr Sinha suggested special attention should be paid to such ecosystem changes in the Himalayas.

As different sub-regions will be affected to various degrees, regional migration may be significant. However, Mr Sinha pointed out that climate-induced migration is not sufficiently discussed in the region, even though it needs to be studied in order to understand which levels of migration will be problematic.

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Although cooperation in South Asia is still suffering due to a lack of institutional and political space for non-conventional approaches, Mr Sinha commented that India's stance towards climate change could have a positive spill-over effect on the other countries in the region. The issue of political acceptability of a link between security and climate change, however, remains of concern and should be addressed before real progress can be made. Furthermore, especially in terms of water security, international cooperation with China is important, due to existing hydrologic conditions and the related hydro-politics.



Mr **Michael Renner**, of the Worldwatch Institute, US, focused his remarks more on the water scarcity seen in the region – which he explained is often due to poor water and, in general, ecosystem management. While translating the science into policy is not an easy task, domestic, bilateral and regional politics are closely interlinked, and many examples of cooperation exist. Mr Renner reminded participants that environmental resources can in fact provide a good pathway to cooperation when viewed as a shared vulnerability.

Mr Renner then gave an overview of several aspects deserving particular attention. In terms of *environmental monitoring and data sharing*, he underscored that unlike quantitative data, it is much easier and less controversial to share qualitative data. In terms of increasing cooperation potential, data could also be jointly collected by cross-country actors. More importantly still would be a trusted repository for collected data – Mr

Renner pointed to the role that could be played by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD). ICIMOD can be an appropriate institution to support cooperation efforts, on international and domestic levels.

Another key issue mentioned was *ecosystem stewardship*, of which water conservation is a part. However, a broader ecosystems assessment is needed in order to paint a holistic picture of climate change impacts in the Himalaya region – including on forests, wetlands, floodplains, and biodiversity. Here the crucial role of organisations like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in supporting knowledge exchange platforms was highlighted.

Peace-parks were mentioned as a helpful example of cross-border conservation areas. Although positive experience has been gathered from implementing such projects around the world, in South Asia there have been no actions taken following consultations around this topic. Again, the importance of learning from other regions – perhaps through academic networks – was underscored.

Finally, the idea of *'disaster diplomacy'* was discussed. The type of goodwill politics that emerge post-disaster are excellent windows of opportunity. However, it would be even more useful to draw up mechanisms and institutions to prevent disasters and build resilience. Mr Renner underlined the important role for third party facilitation and regional platforms. Echoing Mr Sinha's conclusions, he reminded that a broader framing is necessary that includes foreign ministry and other institutional actors, in addition to civil society and academic stakeholders.



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Key Messages

During the following discussions participants jointly identified key climate change-related risks and response measures in the Himalaya.

- **Addressing crucial trends:** assessments indicate future decreased availability of natural resources - including distributional challenges - as well as increasing numbers and intensity of natural disasters. As a result, risks from climate change may arise in the areas of health, migration, food, energy, and water pollution.
- **Foster regional stability:** top-down approaches should be complemented with bottom-up actions - including Track II as well as initiatives for sharing knowledge and experiences among actors at the community level.
- **Consider migration:** whereas migration is often considered as a potential conflict risk, it is also necessary to be aware of its potential dividends: migrant networks and diasporas can mobilise resources and raise awareness for the risks of climate change.
- **Use science as a platform:** academic exchange needs to be strengthened as an important pillar of cooperation. Scientific facilitator teams can provide a regional platform for different stakeholders (academic, parliamentarian, civil society, political foundations, etc.) to collaborate, e.g., on environmental data exchange.
- **Strengthen institutions:** in addition to the support of existing regional institutions such as ICIMOD, the creation of institutions now lacking - on specific challenges such as sea-level rise or glacier melting for instance - can be considered.
- **Tackle disasters:** preventative 'disaster diplomacy' at the sub-regional and regional levels should be supported. Germany can help in strengthening national disaster management capabilities throughout the region, and the EU could share knowledge and experience through best practices networks such as INTERREG, on interregional cooperation.

About the Dialogue Series

The Climate Security Dialogue Series provides a forum for discussing the impacts of a shifting climate in times of political, economic, and demographic transformation. Linking political, practical, and scientific expertise, the Dialogues aim to identify necessary regional cooperation constellations and measures to minimise negative implications for development, livelihoods, and peace.

The Climate Security Dialogues Series was initiated by adelphi in Berlin, the KlimaCampus Research Group "Climate Change and Security" (CLISEC) at the University of Hamburg, and the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy Hamburg (IFSH), in cooperation with and supported by the German Federal Foreign Office.

Past Dialogues in 2011 addressed the South Mediterranean, Central Asia, and Latin America (Andean region).

Visit www.ecc-platform.org and <http://clisec.zmaw.de/Climate-Security-Dialogues.1876.0.html> for more information.

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