



THE PEW PROJECT ON
NATIONAL SECURITY, ENERGY AND CLIMATE

The Impact of Pakistan's Monsoon Floods on America's National Security

Since the end of July, monsoon rains have severely affected Pakistan, with flooding levels not seen since at least the 1920s. Representatives of Pakistan's government have stated that the floods have displaced at least 20 million people, with floodwaters covering as much as a fifth of the South Asian nation.¹ The humanitarian and environmental consequences of the severe flooding ensure that this will rank as among the world's most damaging natural disasters on record. Although no single extreme weather event can be attributed directly to climate change, scientists say the planet's rising air and sea temperatures mean such severe occurrences will become more intense.²

The situation in Pakistan is particularly relevant to the United States not only because of the unfolding humanitarian crisis, but also because the floods could affect U.S. national security. Pakistan borders Iran, Afghanistan, China and India and thus plays a role in several key American foreign policy goals in the region, including preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons, fighting the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, supporting democracy and establishing and promoting trade.

The two major concerns related to American national security that are raised by the extreme flooding are the potential for Pakistan's government to destabilize further and the effect on U.S. military activities in Afghanistan, diverting forces and disrupting supply lines.

Pakistan's Precarious Security Situation

Even before the floods, Pakistan was experiencing a high level of political and social stress:

- Pakistan ranks 10th on *Foreign Policy* magazine's Failed States Index, judged as more unstable than countries such as North Korea and Haiti.³
- Since its creation in 1947, Pakistan has fought three wars (in 1947-48, 1965 and 1971) and pursued an additional major military confrontation with India in 1999.⁴

- The nation has been under military rule, established through coups, on several occasions, with the most recent military-led government ending in 2008.
- Major tensions exist within the government, especially between the nation's last military ruler, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, and the Supreme Court.
- Pakistan's intelligence agency—the Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)—has long been accused of acting independently and many times in ways counter to the goals of the nation's leadership. The ISI was particularly instrumental in Pakistan's support of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan from the mid-1990s to September 2001.⁵ More recently, the ISI has been accused of helping the Afghan Taliban organize attacks on U.S. forces.⁶

Over the past few years, growing security threats have arisen in and around Pakistan, from Islamic extremist groups, particularly in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas bordering Afghanistan and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly the North-West Frontier Province). Since October 2008, the Pakistani military has conducted operations, supported by the U.S. military, in these regions to stem the activities of extremist groups.⁷ (The Pakistani Taliban, for example, have been implicated by U.S. officials in the attempted car bombing of Times Square in May 2010.⁸)

The Potential for the Floods to Further Destabilize Pakistan's Government

The magnitude of the disaster has made it difficult for the Pakistani government to provide a timely response to people in the affected areas (a difficulty the government also faced in the aftermath of Pakistan's devastating earthquake in October 2005). Then, as now, militant groups stepped up with humanitarian relief for the afflicted. Such actions help these groups establish legitimacy with residents. Losing the support of the population will make it more difficult for the Pakistani government to unearth insurgent networks and disrupt their domestic and overseas activities.

In addition to Pakistan's difficulties providing an immediate response to the floods, the recovery phase of the disaster may also challenge the government. The agricultural sector produces 22 percent of the nation's gross domestic product and employs 43 percent of the labor force—approximately 23 million people.⁹ Pakistan is also one of the most irrigated countries in the world. The floods in recent weeks have destroyed much of the nation's irrigation system, canal networks and hydropower production. In the southern portion of Punjab province, which is the agriculture belt of Pakistan, floodwaters washed away millions of acres of crops, with damage estimated at more than US\$1 billion.¹⁰

In the long term, however, the challenge associated with water is that Pakistan will probably have too little rather than too much. Reports predict that as climate change continues to melt the Himalayan glaciers—which feed Pakistan's Indus River Valley—severe shortages could occur within a few decades.¹¹ Water scarcity could erode the nation's social cohesion as well as

relations with India (with which it has water-sharing agreements). Already, overuse has made the Indus River a trickle by the time it reaches the Arabian Sea near Karachi.¹²

The Negative Impact on U.S. Military Activities in Afghanistan

The Pakistani floods are affecting the American military in two ways: Military assets are being diverted for humanitarian relief, and supply lines to troops in Afghanistan have been hindered.

The U.S. military has been providing relief aid to Pakistan mainly through the use of four cargo planes to deliver supplies and 19 helicopters.¹³ The effect of these diversions on the Afghanistan war effort is unclear.

Perhaps of more immediate concern is the slowing of supply lines to troops in Afghanistan. Nearly all of the supplies flowing into Camp Leatherneck, the Marine Corps installation near Kandahar, and to Bagram Air Field near Kabul flow through Pakistan. Supplies arrive at the port of Karachi and move via truck convoys to the border. Floods have wiped out the two main routes used by the military, and in some cases the roads and bridges will not be repaired for weeks. Meanwhile, supplies are delayed.¹⁴

According to the Marine's Office of Expeditionary Energy, trucking supplies from Karachi to Camp Leatherneck, a distance of approximately 515 miles (830 kilometers as the crow flies), took about 45 days before the floods.¹⁵ The delivery time now is uncertain, but clearly longer.

Conclusion: The Potential Climate Change Connection

The magnitude of the flooding in Pakistan threatens not only the lives and livelihoods of victims, but it could also undermine key national security priorities of the United States and the international community.

Furthermore, the situation unfolding in Pakistan may signal future international security challenges. While the environmental effects of climate change are in and of themselves unlikely to spark conflict, they can act as "threat multipliers" by adding complex and destabilizing forces to fragile regions of the world.¹⁶ As the U.S. Department of Defense noted in its 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, climate change "may act as an accelerant of instability or conflict, placing a burden to respond on civilian institutions and militaries around the world."¹⁷

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- ¹³ Carden, Army Sgt. 1st Class M.J. "Mattis to Assess U.S. Aid to Pakistan." American Forces Press Service. Aug. 23, 2010. www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=60551.
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