

Pakistan's dual crisis: conflict and climate

Maria Jawad Khan | September 24, 2024



Pakistan, a country historically embroiled in geopolitical conflicts, is now grappling with an even more complex challenge—one that is as natural as it is political. The latest World Risk Report, published by Germany's Ruhr University Bochum – Institute for International Law of Peace and Armed Conflict (IFHV), places Pakistan among the countries with the highest exposure to conflict and disaster risks. As Pakistan re-enters the list of the most conflict-prone nations,

alongside Colombia, Brazil, and Myanmar, the report sheds light on the increasingly intricate nexus of environmental vulnerability and socio-political instability.

In the context of South Asia, where multiple crises are interwoven, Pakistan stands out as a case study of how climatic disasters and conflict mutually reinforce each other. With its history of political fragility, socio-economic inequality, and strategic location between rival powers, Pakistan's exposure to both natural and man-made crises presents a unique set of challenges for the region and the world.

Pakistan's vulnerability to natural disasters, exacerbated by climate change, is well-documented. The devastating floods of 2010 and 2022, which displaced millions, are a stark reminder of the environmental fragility that has become a recurring feature of the country's landscape. Pakistan's geographical makeup—ranging from high-altitude glacial regions to low-lying floodplains—makes it particularly susceptible to extreme weather events such as floods, droughts, and heatwaves.

However, climate change is not just an environmental concern; it is deeply entangled with Pakistan's conflict dynamics. The report warns that natural disasters often serve as catalysts for existing conflicts. In Pakistan's case, this is more than a theoretical possibility. Already, the country's poorest and most marginalized areas, such as Balochistan and the ex-FATA region, are hit hardest by both natural disasters and political violence.

Take Balochistan, for example. A region already suffering from an insurgency rooted in economic marginalization and political exclusion, it is increasingly becoming vulnerable to climate-related crises. Droughts and water shortages, exacerbated by poor infrastructure

and governance, have added an additional layer of tension to a province where local grievances have long fueled unrest. Similarly, the ex-FATA region, scarred by decades of militancy and counter-terror operations, faces growing environmental degradation, contributing to a vicious cycle of instability and displacement.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's internal dynamics cannot be entirely separated from the broader South Asian context. The World Risk Report places multiple South Asian countries—India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar—among the world's top risk hotspots for disasters.

These nations share geographical features that make them highly susceptible to natural hazards: the melting glaciers of the Himalayas, unpredictable monsoons, and rising sea levels along vast coastlines. The shared environmental challenges across South Asia emphasize the need for regional cooperation, yet entrenched political hostilities—especially between Pakistan and India—hinder meaningful collaboration on these fronts.

Furthermore, the report's findings on Pakistan highlight a troubling pattern: the intersection of environmental degradation and socio-political instability can become a breeding ground for conflict. In countries with fragile institutions, such as Pakistan, natural disasters do more than devastate the economy—they unravel the social fabric. The resulting displacement, food insecurity, and competition over resources can ignite new conflicts or intensify existing ones.

For example, Pakistan's reliance on agriculture—a key economic sector increasingly vulnerable to droughts and floods—makes the country particularly susceptible to food shortages. According to the World Bank, nearly 40% of Pakistan's labour force is employed in agriculture, and climate-induced crop failures could have cascading effects, including rising food prices, unemployment, and rural unrest. In regions like Sindh and Punjab, where political tensions over

resource allocation are already high, a food crisis could easily escalate into broader conflict.

Water scarcity, an issue of contention between India and Pakistan, is another potential flashpoint. As climate change accelerates glacial melt in the Himalayas and disrupts river flows, both countries face dwindling water supplies. The Indus Water Treaty, a key agreement governing shared river waters between the two countries, may come under strain as environmental pressures grow. If either side perceives that its water security is threatened, the risk of escalating conflict becomes alarmingly real.

Moreover, a critical factor in Pakistan's vulnerability is the weakness of its institutions. As the report points out, countries with high exposure to conflict and natural disasters often struggle with poor governance, corruption, and ineffective disaster response mechanisms. Pakistan's disaster management systems, though improved since the catastrophic 2010 floods, still suffer from significant shortcomings, including lack of coordination between provincial and federal authorities, limited financial resources, and inadequate early warning systems.

Besides, political polarization and internal conflicts divert attention and resources away from long-term disaster preparedness. In the absence of comprehensive policies that address both environmental vulnerabilities and conflict prevention, Pakistan risks falling into a cycle where crises feed off each other, creating an ever-growing burden on the state and its people.

Therefore, in order to break the cycle of disaster and conflict, Pakistan requires a multi-faceted approach that integrates environmental sustainability with conflict resolution and institutional reform. At the national level, Pakistan must strengthen its disaster risk management infrastructure by investing in early warning systems, building climate-resilient infrastructure, and improving the capacity of local

governments to respond to crises. Special attention should be given to regions like Balochistan and ex-FATA, where the impacts of both environmental degradation and conflict are most acutely felt.

On the regional front, Pakistan needs to engage in more proactive diplomacy with its neighbors, particularly India, to address shared environmental challenges. While political tensions between the two nations are unlikely to dissipate overnight, cooperation on issues like water management and climate adaptation could serve as confidence-building measures, fostering dialogue that could eventually spill over into other areas of conflict resolution.

Lastly, the international community has a role to play in supporting Pakistan's efforts. Given Pakistan's strategic importance and its exposure to both environmental and conflict risks, international donors and organizations must prioritize funding for climate resilience, disaster management, and conflict prevention programs in the country.

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