



Climate Change, Migration, and Conflict in South Asia

Rising Tensions and Policy Options across the Subcontinent

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Introduction and summary

South Asia will be among the regions hardest hit by climate change. Higher temperatures, more extreme weather, rising sea levels, increasing cyclonic activity in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, as well as floods in the region's complex river systems will complicate existing development and poverty reduction initiatives. Coupled with high population density levels, these climate shifts have the potential to create complex environmental, humanitarian, and security challenges. India and Bangladesh, in particular, will feel the impacts of climate change acutely.

The consequences of climate change will change conditions and undermine livelihoods in many areas. And extreme events and deteriorating conditions are likely to force many to leave their homes temporarily or even permanently for another village, city, region or country.¹

Uncertainty surrounding the specific implications of climate change and migration on security and stability is no longer an excuse for inaction. A 2009 Report of the U.N. Secretary General outlined “second-order effects of unsuccessful adaptation in the form of uncoordinated coping or survival strategies of local populations ... [including] involuntary migration, competition with other communities or groups over scarce resources and an overburdening of local or national governance capacities.”

The Asian Disaster Preparedness Center recently reported that Bangladesh “is already under pressure from increasing demands for food and the parallel problems of depletion of agricultural land and water resources from overuse and contamination. Climate variability and projected global climate change makes the issue particularly urgent.”²

Additionally, Thomas Fingar, chairman of the National Intelligence Council, testified to the U.S. Congress that climate change will exacerbate poverty and increase social tensions, leading to internal instability and conflict, and giving parts of the global population additional reasons to migrate.³ The Pew Charitable Trust's Climate Security Project came to the same conclusion: U.S. national and international security is inextricably linked to global climate change. The project's experts warn that climate change

will increase resource conflicts within and among countries, increase migration pressures on hundreds of millions of people, increase the number of humanitarian disasters, disrupt economies all over the world, and threaten military preparedness.⁴

Recent disasters in South Asia demonstrate what could be a more frequent reality for the region. Floods in September 2012 displaced 1.5 million people in the northeastern state of Assam,⁵ while Cyclone Aila in 2009 displaced 2.3 million people in India and almost 850,000 in Bangladesh.⁶

The Asian Development Bank 2012 report “Climate Change and Migration in Asia and the Pacific” concludes that while uncertainties exist on where, how, and how many will be displaced by climate change impacts, it is imperative to begin aggressively examining emerging climate challenges to avoid future complex crisis scenarios. The extreme vulnerability of South Asia raises concern of potential changes and increases in both internal and international migration across the subcontinent. In areas of existing conflict in South Asia, added stressors of climate change and changing migration patterns could be a security concern.

The United States has the opportunity to build a vital partnership with countries in the region to mutually cope with climate change. Hurricane Sandy, a record breaking year of drought, heat waves, and extreme weather proved that potential impacts of climate change are not problems of distant shores; they are a globally shared burden. The United States has much to learn and offer in the way of best practices as climate change worsens in the decades to come. Large cities in the United States, such as New York and Miami, will be hit hard with extreme weather in very similar ways as South Asian megacities such as Dhaka and Mumbai. Partnering with India and Bangladesh in complex climate scenarios is smart policy and smart diplomacy for the United States. But in order to do this, the United States needs to understand the factors playing out on the ground.

In this paper we examine the role of climate change, migration, and security broadly at the national level in India and Bangladesh—and then zero in more closely on northeast India and Bangladesh to demonstrate the interlocking problems faced by the people there and writ larger across all of South Asia. As discussed in our framing report, “Climate Change, Migration, and Conflict,” we do not assert direct causal relationships between climate change, migration, and conflict. Instead, we understand climate change, migration, and security as three distinct layers of tension and assess scenarios in which the three layers will overlap. The Indian border state of Assam is a case study on where the three factors converge.

Northeast India

A microcosm of climate change, migration, and conflict



Source: Center for American Progress (2012).

Zeroing in on Assam

Assam is located in the northeast region of India, connected to India by a land bridge called the Siliguri corridor, which measures less than 25 miles across. The states in the northeast region are collectively called the Seven Sisters and their cultures and traditions are influenced by greater India as well as bordering Southeast Asia. The consequences of climate change on both sides of the border, existing political issues with migration, and conflict that has plagued the region make Assam a unique case study into the intersection of climate change, migration, and security.

Deteriorating environmental conditions could increasingly influence decisions to move, in addition to social, political, economic, and demographic drivers.⁷ Sudden-

onset and slow-onset climate change events could spark migration in both India and Bangladesh. Sudden-onset events—such as flooding, cyclones, and storm surges—could displace millions of inhabitants within short periods of time, as recent events in India and Bangladesh demonstrate. Slow-onset events—such as changes in precipitation, sea level rise, and land erosion—could have detrimental impacts on key economic sectors—such as agriculture, fishing, and tourism—influencing someone’s decision over time to move for greater economic opportunity.

The internal and temporary displacement of people in this region will probably account for the bulk of migration that takes place in the face of environmental changes and degradation.⁸ People may move within country for a couple days, weeks, or months, or even years to a new location before trying to resettle in their home towns and cities. Rural-to-urban migration has taken place throughout India and Bangladesh and could be more sought after if climate change threatens rural livelihoods, particularly in the agriculture sector.

International migration may also be an option, particularly to areas in which historical, familial, and cultural ties exist across borders, either through a legal or unauthorized process aided by porous and unguarded international borders. As the Asian Development Bank reports, substantial and established flows of migration takes place between India and Bangladesh, particularly to the Indian states of West Bengal and Assam. The bank’s report goes on to say, “It has been suggested that this is the largest single international migration flow, with more people involved than estimated for top-ranked Mexico-United States migration flows.”⁹

No reliable numbers exist on Bangladeshi emigration. But any change in existing migration patterns from Bangladesh into India could have security consequences, particularly in Assam. Back in the 1980s a group called the All Assam Student’s Union began a movement calling for the deportation of all supposed unauthorized Bangladeshi immigrants, asserting that the immigrants were influencing their economy, security, and political system, as well as their local demographic structure. It became known as the Assam movement and lasted until 1985, causing up to 7,000 deaths.¹⁰

More recently, members of the Bodo tribe and the Muslim community clashed in Assam over the building of a mosque. It resulted in close to 100 deaths and the displacement of over 400,000, who fled to relief camps in the area.¹¹ As the conflict escalated, members of the Bodo tribe and a section of politicians began to blame the incident on the increasing number of unauthorized Bangladeshis in the region.¹² In



the following days, rumors spread via text messages and emails that Muslim groups were planning attacks on Assamese residents living in other parts of India, particularly in the southern cities of Bangalore and Chennai. Thousands of people native to the Northeast Indian region boarded overflowing buses and returned to the region. As of October 2012, 133,000 were still in relief camps.¹³ In the days following the conflict, many in Assam resorted to public demonstration and protests against unauthorized immigrants from Bangladesh demanding their identification and deportation, similar to the fervor during the 1980s Assam movement.

The conflict in Assam caused upheaval across the country, highlighting the issue of unauthorized immigrants, which routinely becomes an issue during elections in Assam. In assessing the security challenges of climate change, Assam provides an example of several factors coming together in a complex way. Climate change will stress existing migration patterns both locally and internationally in Bangladesh. Even more importantly, the *perception* that there has been an increase in immigrants has the potential to stoke tensions over immigration in Assam.

Activists of North Eastern Students Organization gather to rally against Bangladeshi nationals illegally staying in the northeastern Indian states. The Assam state of Gauhati has been simmering with tension since riots broke out between ethnic Bodos and Muslim settlers in late July 2012. The violence has killed at least 90 people so far, and 400,000 have found shelter in government relief camps.

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What this means for the United States and the world

Given the likelihood that large-scale climatic events will strike the region in decades ahead, it is important to grasp how the complex historical and cultural issues associated with migration in the region could play out. As the United States shifts its strategic focus to the Asia Pacific, a clear understanding of climate change and human mobility will be central to development and security goals in the region. The United States and international policymakers will need to understand and prepare for the added stresses and risks imposed by climate change and migration globally.

For the international community the extended region located around India, Bangladesh, and the Bay of Bengal represents both an economic opportunity and a massive development challenge. The unique concentration of population will likely play a pivotal role in coming decades—India and Bangladesh must chart a path of sustainable development by which the region can achieve economic growth while maintaining long-term stability.

The United States could be a vital partner in this effort. We propose three policy collaborations that the United States can take up with South Asian partners as complex crisis scenarios unfold in the wake of climate change:

- High-level climate-vulnerable cities workshop
- A dialogue on migration
- Ecological infrastructure development

These three collaborations are detailed further in the conclusion of the report, but let's briefly examine each of them in turn here.

High-level climate-vulnerable cities workshop

The United States, India, and Bangladesh should lead a high-level workshop on climate vulnerable cities. Cities will be a priority as urbanization continues in India and Bangladesh and as extreme weather challenges the resilience of U.S. urban centers. Cities such as New York, Mumbai, and Dhaka can learn from each other.

The goal should be to zoom in and have detailed discussions about resilient infrastructure, disaster relief logistics, and preparedness best practices across countries and government levels. The workshop would be ideally coordinated at a federal level

through the U.S. Agency for International Development and the U.S. Department of State with governor and mayor level participants. New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo could be in workshop discussions with Mumbai Mayor Sunil Waman Prabhu and Maharashtra's chief minister Prithviraj Chavan as leaders of two cities vulnerable to sea level rise and extreme weather.

A dialogue on migration

The United States and India share numerous concerns about undocumented residents and immigration including social inclusion, path to citizenship, language, cultural differences, deportation issues, border management, and legal status. Comprehensive immigration reform is likely to be tackled in the next four years of the Obama administration. An open exchange between India and the U.S. on immigration would be beneficial to both sides.

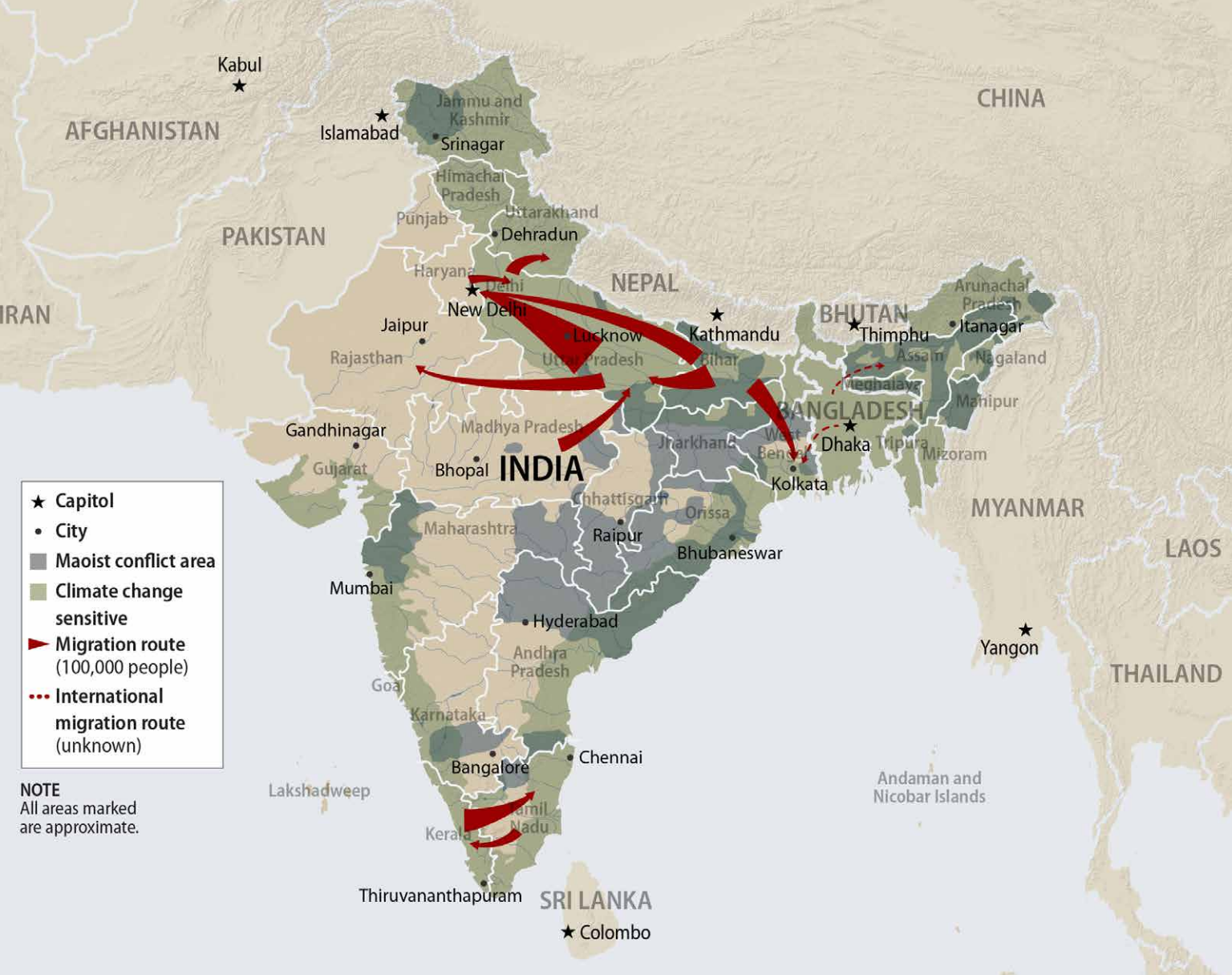
Ecological infrastructure development

Ecological infrastructure involves using natural landscapes and ecosystems for the benefit of society. In the case of climate change, natural landscapes that mitigate the consequences of flooding, water salinization, and erosion may be both cost effective and more resilient than traditional infrastructure, such as levies and pumps.

Residents of India and Bangladesh have been innovating ecological infrastructure due to lack of formal structures in many areas. As in the cases of city adaptation and immigration, a U.S. partnership with India and Bangladesh on ecological infrastructure would create a rich depository on adaptation strategies while informing U.S. diplomacy and development programs on the ground.

The importance of Assam in climate change, migration, and conflict in South Asia

Analyzing South Asia through the prism of climate, migration, and security in Assam and the surrounding region provides useful insights into the underlying trends shaping the entire region and the risks posed by current long-term trajectories. While the precise influence of climate change on migration is still the subject of scientific inquiry and debate, the range of issues facing the region calls



Sources: Government of India, Ministry of Environment & Forests, "Climate Change and India: A 4x4 Assessment" (2010), available at <http://moefnic.in/downloads/public-information/fin-rpt-incca.pdf>. "India: Chronic Conflict," available at http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/images/India_2011_Map.jpg. "Urban India 2011: Evidence," Indian Institute for Human Settlements (2012).

for a comprehensive assessment of climate change, migration, and their impact on both traditional and human security. We hope the assessment will be a jumping-off point for more empirical research establishing the realities of climate driven migration in South Asia.

To assess these overlapping dynamics, we begin our report with an examination of the climate change, migration, and security issues facing India and Bangladesh before turning in greater detail to the northeastern region of the subcontinent, and specifically the Indian state of Assam.

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