



And Then Things Got Complicated: Addressing the Security-Climate-Migration Nexus in South Asia

February 2022

Times are changing. The intersecting challenges of climate change, human migration, and instability present a unique problem for many local and regional actors in crisis regions. Yet as challenges that do not respect borders, they also represent a mounting concern for European and U.S. foreign policy and multilateral institutions. Already, these issues are beginning to overlap in ways that undermine traditional notions of security and development policy – and they offer ample reason to revisit deeply ingrained policy siloes of diplomacy, development, and defense. In decades to come, this dilemma will broaden and intensify. While promising steps have been taken at the global level to overcome these divisions, they are neither happening sufficiently or quickly enough nor at the local levels.

The nexus of climate change, human mobility, and instability demands new forms of multilateral engagement, and an end to outdated divisions of labor within governments. However, bureaucratic inertia is strong, and there is often an inadequate understanding of the urgency of this far-reaching transformation among political and military leaders; many still try to make sense of the world through the dated perspectives of the past century. In the 21st century, security needs to be defined more broadly – complex crisis scenarios revolve around the ability to compel collective action to address fundamental transnational problems. Mobilizing this sort of action to address the nexus between climate change, human migration, and instability will be *the* political litmus test of our time.

South Asia – The first test for Europe’s Indo-Pacific strategy

This paper is part of a larger Nexus25 project of international partners and focuses on a region well known for its climate migration and security connection: South Asia’s region encompassing India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. It is an area of great economic and political relevance for the Western Alliance. The new EU Indo-Pacific strategy agreed in April 2021, the first of its kind, is just one indication.¹ Given the ongoing reorientation of European relations with China in the context of closer and more strategic transatlantic cooperation, an analysis of the region is central to discussions on new multilateral collaboration in times of complex crisis scenarios. At the same time, the United States is focused very much on the Pacific Arena, trying to deal with China’s rise and the ripple effects it creates in the neighborhood. There is little doubt that the region will be at the center of attention in Washington for decades to come.

South Asia is particularly vulnerable to climate change and India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar are already experiencing multiple and interrelated harms, including higher temperatures, extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and more frequent cyclones in the Indian Ocean and especially in the Bay of Bengal. In addition, flooding in the region’s complex river systems is complicating existing development and poverty reduction initiatives.²

¹ Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on an EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, 16 April 2021, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7914-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.

² See Somini Sengupta and Julfikar Ali Manik, “A Quarter of Bangladesh Is Flooded. Millions Have Lost Everything”, in *The New York Times*, 30 July 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/climate/bangladesh-floods.html>.



Coupled with high population density, these changes can create complex environmental, humanitarian, and security challenges and intensify existing political confrontations.³

Over the past decade, recurrent weather and food crises led to uncoordinated coping and survival strategies among local populations, including involuntary mass migration to urban centers. In Bangladesh alone, where disastrous floods are a regular occurrence, over 15 million people are exposed to the risk of sea-level rise, partly due to climate-driven glacial meltdowns in neighboring India.⁴ Some 400 million people will migrate from rural regions to urban centers in India over the next four decades as the country becomes far drier and hotter.⁵ The effects can hardly be overestimated. New waves of migration have the potential to touch off religious conflicts, encourage the spread of contagious diseases, and cause extensive damage to infrastructure. India alone will contribute 22 percent of global population growth over the next 25 years and count 1.67 billion inhabitants by 2050, causing demographic developments that will spark significant internal migration across the country.⁶ India will

³ See, for example, David Dennis, "Southeast Asia's Coming Climate Crisis", in *New Perspectives on Asia*, 22 May 2020, <https://www.csis.org/node/56767>.

⁴ See: Ashley Moran et al., *Fragility and Climate Risk in Bangladesh*, Washington, USAID, September 2018, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00TBFJ.pdf. In addition: Climate Reality Project, "How the Climate Crisis Is Impacting Bangladesh", in *Climate Reality Project Blog*, 9 December 2021, <https://www.climaterealityproject.org/node/12394>; William Park, "The Country Disappearing under Rising Tides", in *BBC Future*, 2 September 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190829-bangladesh-the-country-disappearing-under-rising-tides>; R. Krishnan et al. (eds), *Assessment of Climate Change over the Indian Region. A Report of the Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES), Government of India*, Singapore, Springer, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-4327-2>.

⁵ See the UN projections here: UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), *2018 Revision of World Urbanization Prospects*, 16 May 2018, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html>.

⁶ See, for example: SDG Knowledge Hub, *India's Population Expected to Surpass China's by*

struggle to manage its own climate-induced pressures – never mind effectively integrate climate migrants from abroad. Yet, beyond Bangladesh, the current turmoil in Myanmar could result in further refugee flows into Thailand and India.⁷

Myanmar: The new Nexus test case

Myanmar is often seen as part of Southeast Asia, but climate change, human mobility, and stability are already manifesting in complex and multidimensional ways that affect India and Bangladesh, its western neighbors, making its inclusion in this region critical for any analysis and strategy to tackle this nexus.

Sharing borders with Bangladesh, India, China, Laos, and Thailand, Myanmar has a population of 55 million, a third of whom live in urban centers, spread across a geography larger than France and Great Britain combined. Its strategic location makes it a potential future player in the Indo-Pacific, and both Europe and the U.S. courted the country during its brief opening following half a century of military rule. The country's location is strategically important, and its resources and potential for investment and growth under more stable and democratic conditions are considerable. However, neglect and lack of national and multilateral coordination on the well-documented climate-migration-security challenges have contributed to a situation in which a massive crisis in Myanmar now threatens the region's long-term stability. The complex situation

2050: World Population Data Sheet, 1 October 2019, <https://sdg.iisd.org/?p=394387>; or, with regard to the latter region: David Dennis, "Southeast Asia's Coming Climate Crisis", cit.

⁷ Richard Horsey, "One Year On from the Myanmar Coup", in *Crisis Group Q&A*, 25 January 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/18793>.

has been further complicated by political instability. A coup in February 2021 unleashed an armed resistance that has already forced hundreds of thousands of people from their homes, adding to already stressed services within the country and across borders. Myanmar is an example of “how mass atrocities and the climate crisis feed on each other” and it is “essential to recognize” the links, argues Matthew Smith, founder and CEO of Fortify Rights.⁸

Migration, climate, and security in Myanmar: Need for nexus thinking

Armed conflict has been a traditional driver of human mobility and displacement in Myanmar, which for decades was home to around two dozen ethnic non-state armed groups and hundreds of militias of varying sizes.⁹ Thailand has hosted tens of thousands of refugees from Myanmar for over 30 years.¹⁰ Despite signing a nationwide ceasefire agreement in 2015, clashes have continued, and nearly 350,000 were internally displaced as of January 2021.¹¹ Post-coup, that number has risen to 556,000, and one in four people now need humanitarian assistance.¹²

⁸ Interview, January 2022.

⁹ International Crisis Group, “Myanmar’s Coup Shakes Up Its Ethnic Conflicts”, in *Crisis Group Asia Reports*, No. 319 (12 January 2022), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/18745>.

¹⁰ The Border Consortium website: *Camps in Thailand*, <https://www.theborderconsortium.org/?p=348>.

¹¹ OCHA, *Myanmar Humanitarian Update*, No. 3 (27 January 2021), <https://reliefweb.int/node/3707761>.

¹² OCHA, *Myanmar Humanitarian Response Plan 2022*, January 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/node/3812702>.

The most significant migration followed two waves of state-sanctioned attacks against the Muslim Rohingya minority in western Myanmar in 2012 and 2017, when hundreds of thousands of people fled the coastal state of Rakhine and took refuge in neighboring Bangladesh. The attacks were preceded by months of planning and anti-Rohingya discourse online and in official pronouncements, but the large, coordinated assault¹³ involving security forces, officially termed “clearance operations”, began in August 2017 and drove more than 740,000 Rohingya across the border within 100 days.¹⁴

These refugees left the poor, low-lying, and disaster-prone Rakhine (the second-least developed state in Myanmar) for Cox’s Bazar, another poor coastal area in Bangladesh where local communities already live with extreme weather events such as cyclones, landslides, and flash floods.¹⁵ The Bangladesh government is relocating some refugees from Cox’s Bazar’s overcrowded camps – reportedly involuntarily in some cases¹⁶ – to Bhasan Char, a remote silt island formed 20 years ago in the Bay of Bengal. Human rights groups have raised concerns¹⁷ that its geographical location and topography would make

¹³ OHCHR, *Myanmar: UN Fact-Finding Mission Releases Its Full Account of Massive Violations by Military in Rakhine, Kachin and Shan States*, 18 September 2018, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23575>. More information on the fact-finding mission is available in OHCHR website: *Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar*, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/myanmarffm>.

¹⁴ UNHCR website: *Rohingya Emergency*, as of 31 July 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/rohingya-emergency.html>.

¹⁵ UNDP Bangladesh website: *Disaster Risk Management in Cox’s Bazar Programme*, <https://www.bd.undp.org/content/bangladesh/en/home/projects/disaster-risk-management-in-cox-s-bazar-programme0.html>.

¹⁶ Fortify Rights, *Bangladesh: Prevent Coercive and Involuntary Transfers of Rohingya Refugees*, 30 January 2022, <https://www.fortifyrights.org/bgd-inv-2022-01-30>.

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, *“An Island Jail in the Middle of the Sea”: Bangladesh’s Relocation of Rohingya Refugees to Bhasan Char*, 7 June 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/06/07/>

it highly vulnerable to climate change, but some Bangladeshi scientists have said¹⁸ the island is safe for resettlement.¹⁹

The mass atrocities against the Rohingya and now the population are not only a humanitarian catastrophe. The dynamic of destruction also documents the developmental impact given the military junta's focus on maintaining power and solidifying authoritarian rule. But the potential political side effects of climate change and the lack of a robust multilateral rapid response mechanism should not be underestimated either. For a long time now, experts have been clear about the fact that Myanmar is a country "most susceptible to climate change, deforestation, cyclones and impacted coastal populations," says Richard Horsey of the International Crisis Group (ICG).²⁰

Myanmar has a long coastline – nearly 2,000 kilometers or 1,200 miles – and dry zones in the interior. This means half of the population already lives in multi-hazard regions, suffering from high temperatures, droughts, water scarcity, flooding, and storm surges. Even though agriculture is still a key source of income and employment,²¹ food insecurity was already high at 22 percent even

island-jail-middle-sea/bangladeshs-relocation-rohingya-refugees-bhasan-char.

¹⁸ M. Yousuf Gazi et al., "The Stability and Suitability of the Bhasan Char Island as an Accommodation for the Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMN)", in *Sustainability*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (January 2022), Article 747, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14020747>.

¹⁹ Robert O'Connor, "Urban Migration in Myanmar: An Analysis of Migration Patterns and Migrant Well-being", in *City Life Survey Discussion Papers*, June 2020, <https://asiafoundation.org/?p=68149>.

²⁰ Interview, January 2022.

²¹ World Bank Data, *Employment in Agriculture (% of Total Employment) - Myanmar*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.ZS?locations=MM>.

before the coup.²² Public and private infrastructure — from homes and offices to roads and health and education facilities — is often old and of sub-standard quality.

Myanmar's ecosystems have also been under sustained pressure for decades due to successive military governments' overexploitation of natural resources – often with the support of regional and international private and state-owned investors – such as oil, natural gas, and minerals. The country's non-state armed groups have also benefited from resource extraction. Rural communities rely on forest resources for food, fuel, and building materials, but it is state-sanctioned extensive mining and illegal logging that have caused long-running conflicts, large-scale deforestation, and a polluted local environment.²³ Many mangrove forests, which help shield coastal areas from storm surges and erosion, have become shrimp farms and paddy fields. Floods, landslides, and erosion displaced 50,000 people in 2020.²⁴

Sea-level rise will affect a large portion of the Ayeyarwady Delta, dubbed the country's rice bowl.²⁵ Meanwhile, Rakhine, the southern coast, and Yangon are "highly likely" to experience more flooding, storms, and heatwaves. Droughts, flash floods, and landslides are "highly likely" in the central dry zone. Climate

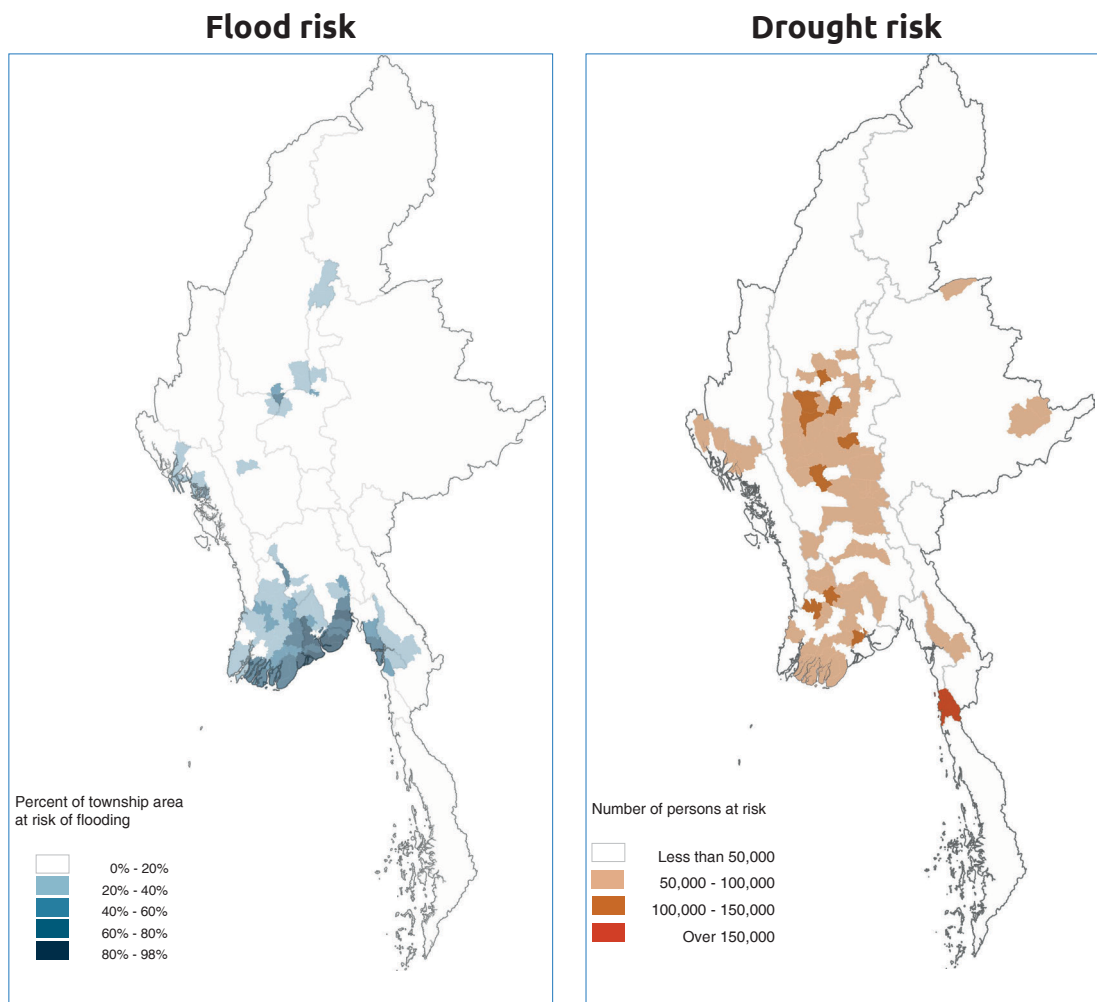
²² FAO and UNICEF, *Asia and the Pacific – Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2021. Statistics and Trends*, Bangkok, FAO, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb7494en>.

²³ Kevin M. Woods, "Natural Resource Governance Reform and the Peace Process in Myanmar", in *Forest Trends Reports*, October 2019, <https://www.forest-trends.org/?p=176065>.

²⁴ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) website: *Myanmar*, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/node/868>.

²⁵ Climate Central website: *Coastal Risk Screening Tool - Land below 1.5 Meters of Water - Myanmar*, https://coastal.climatecentral.org/map/6/95.3721/19.5351/?theme=water_level&map_type=water_level_above_mhbw&basemap=roadmap&contiguous=true&elevation_model=best_available&refresh=true&water_level=1.5&water_unit=m.

change is likely to worsen the plight of marginalized minorities in Rakhine and Chin States, where poverty levels are high and vulnerable populations are already dealing with poor public services, lack of resources and institutions, and conflict, warns a recent Red Cross assessment.²⁶ The two states border India and Bangladesh, facilitating transborder migration.



²⁶ Aditi Kapoor et al., *Climate Change Impacts on Health and Livelihood: Myanmar Assessment*, Red Cross Red Crescent (RCRC) Climate Centre, April 2021, <https://www.climatecentre.org/?p=5920>.

Farmers and environmental activists say climate impacts affect Myanmar through failed harvests and lower crop productivity.²⁷ According to scientific studies, between 1981 and 2010, average daily temperatures in Myanmar increased by about 0.25°C per decade while daily maximum temperatures have risen at a slightly faster rate of 0.4°C per decade.²⁸ Since 1990, Myanmar has seen more tropical cyclones reaching its shores just before the monsoon but fewer after. The most destructive of these was Cyclone Nargis, a Category 4 storm that hit the Ayeyarwady Delta region in May 2008 and killed an estimated 140,000 people.

The immediate aftermath of Cyclone Nargis saw many survivors migrating to bigger towns and cities, particularly the former capital Yangon, to escape the devastation and job scarcity.²⁹ Similar economic and environmental forces have driven domestic migration in Myanmar for decades. A World Bank study found that between 19 and 25 percent of migrants were forced to move suddenly due to shocks such as a natural disaster or family emergency.³⁰

The 2014 census, the first in three decades, found that 19.3 percent of residents have moved at least once in their lifetime, with 7 percent having

²⁷ UN News, *Myanmar's Farmers Battle Climate and Health Uncertainty*, 8 November 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/11/1076362>.

²⁸ Radley Horton et al., *Assessing Climate Risk in Myanmar: Technical Report*, New York, Center for Climate Systems Research at Columbia University, WWF-US and WWF-Myanmar, March 2017, <https://www.worldwildlife.org/publications/assessing-climate-risk-in-myanmar-technical-report>.

²⁹ Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR), *Another Nargis Strikes Every Day. Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring Five Years On*, Washington, World Bank, 2014, <https://www.gfdr.org/en/node/1398>.

³⁰ World Bank, *A Country on the Move: Domestic Migration in Two Regions of Myanmar*, Yangon, World Bank Myanmar, 2016, <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/24981>.

moved in the previous five years.³¹ The actual number could be higher since the census did not count relocation of less than six months, thus excluding seasonal migration. According to the census, most migration took place within rural or urban environments, and rural to urban flows accounted for about 10 percent.³² Urban migrants struggle with many challenges, including overcrowded living conditions, inability to access municipal services, underemployment, and high cost of living.

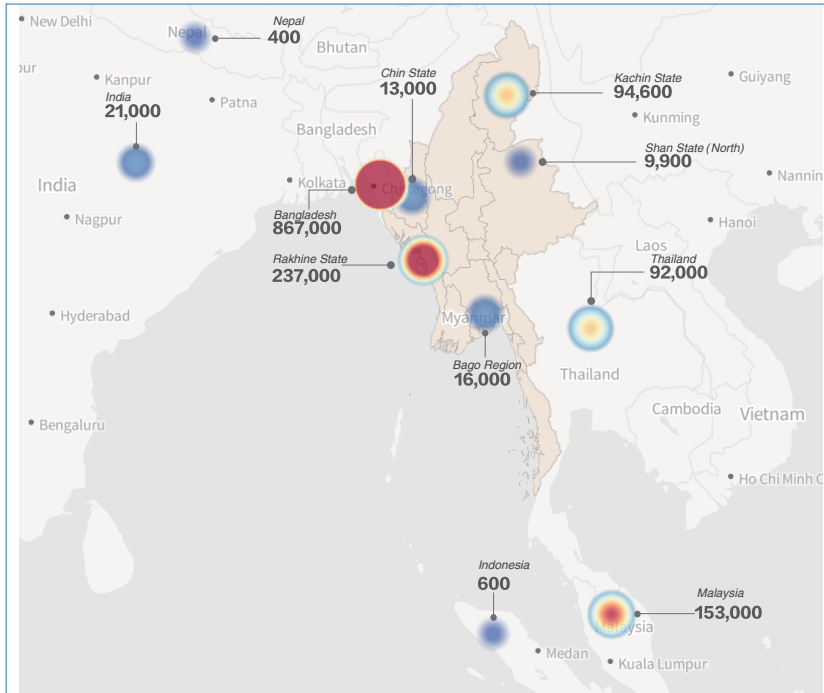
Climate change and political instability caused by the February 2021 coup will pose greater threats for Myanmar's people and its natural resources, and threaten people's ability to make a living. Increased clashes between the military and resistance groups have forced most environmental organizations to halt their operations and many international donors to either wind down activities or shy away from funding new projects.³³

³¹ Myanmar, *Thematic Report on Migration and Urbanization, Census Report Volume 4-D*, December 2016, <https://myanmar.unfpa.org/en/node/11786>.

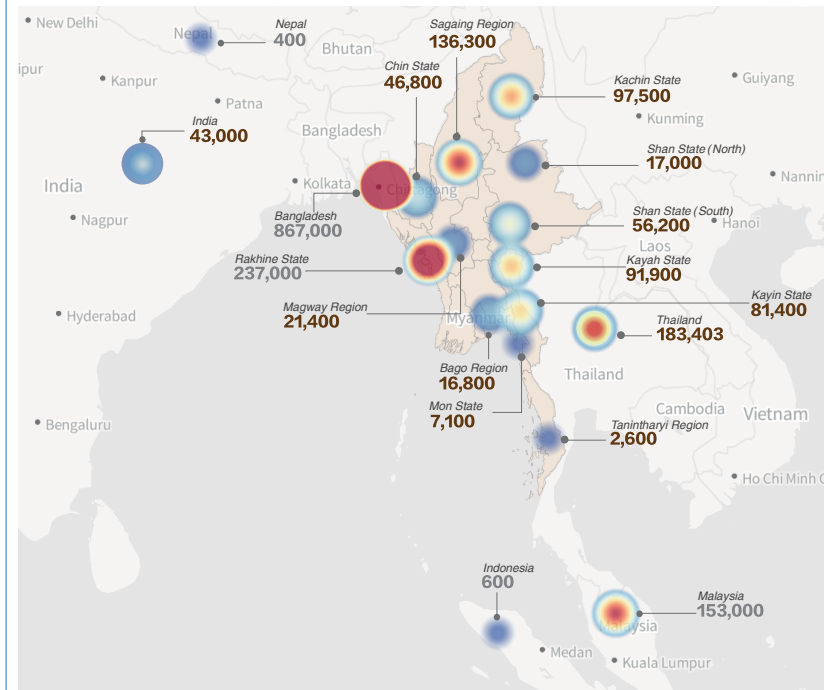
³² Kimberly Rogovin, *Internal Labour Migration in Myanmar. Building an Evidence-Base on Patterns in Migration, Human Trafficking and Forced Labour*, Yangon, International Labour Organization, 2015, https://www.ilo.org/yangon/publications/WCMS_440076; Su-Ann Oh, "Internal Migration in Myanmar: Patterns, Benefits and Challenges", in *ISEAS Perspective*, No. 2019/98 (22 November 2019), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_98.pdf.

³³ Thin Lei Win, "UN Suspends Climate Work with Myanmar Government Following Military Coup", in *Climate Home News*, 3 March 2021, <https://www.climatechangenews.com/?p=43566>.

Displacement before and after the coup



As of December 2020



As of February 2022

The coup and increased insecurity will significantly hinder efforts to tackle climate change in Myanmar, activists and aid workers say. Activists report that some of their colleagues or partners are in hiding, “but the climate crisis has not stopped because of the coup”. The sense of urgency palpable: “This is the most important issue of this century. No matter the political situation [...] we need to address this issue.”³⁴

The coup is also likely to worsen many other indicators that influence the intersecting challenges of climate change, human migration, and instability, particularly in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19 caused job losses and slashed economic output, and the United Nations has warned that the combination of the coup and COVID-19 could leave almost half of Myanmar’s population living below the poverty line by 2022.³⁵ There are additional concerns that the junta would expand natural resource exploitation, further exposing the country’s citizens to weather-related hazards and worsening the pressure on ecosystems.³⁶

Hunger is increasing, even in the main cropping areas away from conflicts, and farmers are selling assets and dipping into savings, all of which could have long-term implications for the country’s food security.³⁷

³⁴ Interview, anonymous for safety reasons.

³⁵ UNDP, *Pandemic and Political Crisis Could Result in Half of Myanmar’s Population Living in Poverty by 2022*, UNDP Says, 30 April 2021, <https://www.undp.org/press-releases/pandemic-and-political-crisis-could-result-half-myanmars-population-living-poverty>.

³⁶ Carolyn Cowan, “Myanmar Junta’s Growing Reliance on Extractives for Cash Raises Concerns”, in *Mongabay*, 18 June 2021, <https://news.mongabay.com/2021/06/myanmar-juntas-growing-reliance-on-extractives-for-cash-raises-concerns>.

³⁷ Interview, anonymous for security reasons. See also: Thin Lei Win, “Myanmar’s Hidden Hunger”, in *The New Humanitarian*, 19 October 2021, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/node/262185>.

Insecurity and a battered economy have caused large-scale displacement and migration both within and across borders, particularly to Thailand and India. In Chin, where the military has burnt homes and churches in towns and villages, almost all the state's 500,000 people³⁸ are displaced, and thousands are now in Mizoram State, India, according to a local aid worker.³⁹

With rising instability, heightened climate risks, and a growing number of people on the move, Myanmar may well be a litmus test for European and U.S. foreign policy and multilateral governance institutions on how to tackle overlapping challenges effectively. Efforts to find regional solutions, particularly on the part of the 10-country regional bloc Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), have so far proved elusive while South Asian neighbors have remained mostly mum. This is particularly troublesome since the current crisis highlights old migration-driven conflicts between Bangladesh and India – an issue that has led to violent attacks in past decades and still plays a role in domestic Indian and Bangladesh politics.⁴⁰ The entire region is caught in the competing spheres of influence between China and India, to further complicate matters. After a brief period of good relations following India's independence, "bilateral ties soured over border disputes, in Aksai Chin in India's West and Arunachal Pradesh in the East, a region China refers to as South Tibet".⁴¹ Both

³⁸ Myanmar, *Census Atlas Myanmar, 2017*, <https://myanmar.unfpa.org/en/node/29202>.

³⁹ Interview, anonymous for safety reasons.

⁴⁰ Namrata Goswami, "Assam in Turmoil", in *IDS Comments*, 25 July 2012, <https://idsa.in/node/9924>. The issue impacts the entire region: according to new data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 54.5 million people were displaced by weather-related natural disasters across Southeast Asia between 2008 and 2018. See IDMC website: *2020 Internal Displacement*, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/node/945>.

⁴¹ Arpita Bhattacharyya and Michael Werz, *Climate Change, Migration, and Conflict in South*

long-standing territorial disputes remain unresolved and contribute to the regional competition in a crowded neighborhood.

Missing in action? Multilateral engagement

Globally, much progress has been made over the past few years to integrate migration and displacement issues in climate change discussions. UN climate summits in Warsaw and Paris established, respectively, the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage associated with Climate Change Impacts (WIM),⁴² to address the impacts of erratic weather in developing nations, and the Task Force on Displacement, to develop recommendations for integrated approaches to “avert, minimize and address displacement related to the adverse impacts of climate change”.⁴³ The Global Compact for Migration, adopted at the end of 2018, is the first inter-governmentally negotiated agreement covering all dimensions of international migration.⁴⁴ However, gaps remain when it comes to local implementation. Most activists, researchers, and policy analysts argue that the multilateral system – which is essential – needs reform and adjustment.

The same is true for ASEAN, which has been working, unsuccessfully, to resolve the latest crisis in Myanmar. In addition, much of ASEAN’s efforts have focused

Asia. Rising Tensions and Policy Options across the Subcontinent, Washington, Center for American Progress, December 2012, p. 10, <https://www.americanprogress.org/?p=47976>.

⁴² UNFCCC website: *Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage associated with Climate Change Impacts (WIM)*, <https://unfccc.int/node/16493>.

⁴³ UNFCCC website: *Task Force on Displacement*, <https://unfccc.int/node/285>.

⁴⁴ IOM website: *Global Compact for Migration*, <https://www.iom.int/node/102769>.

on the political situation and less on pressing nexus issues which have “not been included in many of the longer-term development conversations”. They also have not received “the level of priority that they should have”, argues ICG’s Richard Horsey.⁴⁵ The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is similar in ambition to ASEAN, but tensions within the region have limited existing frameworks on climate change and food security and Myanmar is not a member.⁴⁶

Noeleen Heyzer, the new UN Special Envoy for Myanmar, is a former head of the UN’s regional development hub and was integral in setting up the Tripartite Core Group, comprised of the Myanmar government, ASEAN, and the UN, to build trust, confidence, and cooperation in post-Cyclone Nargis Myanmar in 2008.⁴⁷ But her task has been made difficult by the severity of the crisis and the unrelenting position of the military junta, which has shown no willingness to negotiate and continues to be immune to international criticism, leaving little space for new cooperation mechanisms to address the spiraling nexus crisis. Like other complex crisis regions, Myanmar demonstrates the limits of a multilateral system that was designed 70 years ago and lacks leverage. “Like most Western governments, the UN has been content to outsource most diplomatic efforts to ASEAN, whose member states agreed in April 2021 to a five-point consensus on steps the military regime must take to de-escalate violence. [...] But its modest diplomatic efforts, under rotating chairs Brunei and now Cambodia, have gained no real traction with a regime unwilling to

⁴⁵ Interview, January 2022.

⁴⁶ Michael Kugelman, “Climate-Induced Displacement: South Asia’s Clear and Present Danger”, in *Wilson Center Articles*, 30 September 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/node/94861>.

⁴⁷ See UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) website: *Special Envoy Myanmar*, <https://dppa.un.org/en/node/184299>.

make concessions,” ICG’s Horsey has said.⁴⁸

The crisis in Myanmar and its impact on neighboring countries reveals the weakness and structural deficits of South Asia’s regional institutions and multilateral integration. The region neither has an effective mechanism representing countries in global climate negotiations – unlike Africa which has a common position – nor a structure to address nexus issues.⁴⁹ International efforts have also been insufficient and are dominated by geopolitical concerns.⁵⁰ In particular, the U.S.’s engagement in the region is often driven by and focused on China or the South China Sea. The framing of climate change as a hard security issue for the U.S. and Europe is often incomplete and can lead to misaligned policies, some warn.⁵¹ Usually, migration and displacement due to weather-related disasters are localized, and within national borders: “I think there’s a perception that at some point in the future, many people suddenly up and leave and head to Europe or the U.S. or Australia or wherever. This is not necessarily the case”, says one migration and climate expert.⁵² In addition, such a narrative will lead to border closures instead of providing safe routes, another added.⁵³

⁴⁸ Richard Horsey, “One Year On from the Myanmar Coup”, cit.

⁴⁹ African Union, *Common African Position on the Post-2015 Development Agenda*, March 2014, <https://au.int/en/node/32848>.

⁵⁰ See International Crisis Group, “The Deadly Stalemate in Post-coup Myanmar”, in *Crisis Group Asia Briefings*, No. 170 (20 October 2021), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/18200>.

⁵¹ Based on confidential interviews.

⁵² Based on a confidential interview.

⁵³ Based on a confidential interview.

Still, local events can have global repercussions. Irregular migration, whether internal or regional, could test political systems, increase humanitarian needs, encourage illegal resource extraction, and fuel both conflict and climate change. Which is why the stability of countries like Myanmar is important to the world (the EU and the U.S. in particular). Such stability however is threatened by the interconnection of nexus challenges: local crises today have often global significance – especially in locations of strategic significance like South Asia. Thus, it is important to readjust foreign and security policy priorities and focus more on how nexus crises can drive instability. Internal and irregular migration are testing political systems in several regions worldwide and increase the need for greater humanitarian commitment on the part of the international community. At the same time, illegal resource extraction is fueling both conflict and climate change. Thus, major players must engage and rethink the limitation in political and economic resources as well as domestic realities in many emerging countries. There are no easy solutions at this point.

The way forward

And there is no time to lose: in the coming decades, climate change will increasingly threaten humanity's shared interests and collective security in many parts of the world, disproportionately affecting the globe's least developed countries. It will pose challenging social, political, and strategic questions for the many different multinational, regional, national, and nonprofit organizations dedicated to improving the human condition worldwide. Organizations as diverse as Amnesty International, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the World Bank, the International Rescue Committee, and the World Health Organization will not only have to tackle the

various effects of climate change directly but incorporate nexus thinking in their approaches. Although some of these organizations have begun addressing climate challenges in different ways, more needs to be done.

Climate change also poses distinct challenges to international security. Recent intelligence reports and scenario games, including some conducted by the U.S. Department of Defense, concluded that over the next two or three decades, vulnerable regions (particularly sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia) will face the prospect of food shortages, water crises, and catastrophic flooding driven by climate change. These developments could demand U.S., European, and international humanitarian relief or military responses.

Achim Steiner, former executive director of the UN Environment Program and current head of the UN Development Program, argued a decade ago that the “question we must continuously ask ourselves in the face of scientific complexity and uncertainty, but also growing evidence of climate change, is at what point precaution, common sense or prudent risk management demands action”.⁵⁴ It is time to translate this suggestion into political action.

The interplay between climate, water, food, migration, urbanization, and economic, social, and political stress transcends national borders. Yet few of these issues are part of traditional international relations debates, which focus far more on the conventional geopolitics of interstate relations, particularly the distribution of military and economic power among a handful of the most important states. Insecurity is defined mainly in terms of military threats posed

⁵⁴ Achim Steiner, “Climate Migration Will Not Wait for Scientific Certainty on Global Warming”, in *The Guardian*, 11 May 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/2p26e>.



by rising or declining powers and security dilemmas between rival states. It is time to introduce a greater degree of complexity into these conversations.

Nexus²⁵ project partners are the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) in Rome and the United Nations Foundation. The project, led by Nathalie Tocci at IAI and Michael Werz at the Center for American Progress, is funded by Stiftung Mercator in Germany. For more information please consult: <http://www.nexus25.org>.

Authors of this paper are Thin Lei Win, a journalist and researcher, and Michael Werz, a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress in Washington D.C., and Scientific Advisor at IAI.

This paper was written as input for the Nexus²⁵ side event at the 2022 Munich Security Conference. In addition to the side event at the 2022 Munich Security Conference, the project partners will host additional events on the sidelines of the IMF and World Bank 2022 spring meetings in Washington DC and the UN High Level Political Forum in New York. The conclusions of these meetings will be discussed at a Nexus Conference in Rome on 24 and 25 May 2022. For additional information or requests to participate in our meetings please contact Nathalie Tocci (n.tocci@iai.it) or Michael Werz (mwerz@americanprogress.org).

