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## CLIMATE SECURITY IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR SINGAPORE

*Climate security is gaining momentum in international and regional forums, such as the United Nations Security Council and Shangri-La Dialogue. It is time for countries and organisations in the Asia-Pacific to construct a common understanding of climate security and set priorities for the region. How might Singapore engage in the emerging regional discourse, asks **LINA GONG**, given its own vulnerability to climate risk, and active participation in regional security?*



A memorandum of understanding signed on 10 June 2022 in Hawaii, reinforcing the relationship between Changi RHCC and its US counterpart Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance. *The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.*

A climate security discourse first emerged in the mid-2000s, featuring the climate conflict narrative. Its argument is that climate change increases the risk of conflict in fragile countries and subsequently threatens regional and international peace and

security. A few industrialised countries have led this discourse at the international level. The United Kingdom initiated the first debate linking climate change and international peace and security at the UN Security Council in [2007](#), and Germany proposed the second one in [2011](#).

### **Conflict Multiplier or Existential Threat?**

This alarmist narrative has been contested by many in both industrialised and developing countries. First, some people argue that the drivers of conflict are often complex and that scientific evidence to support the link between climate and conflict is lacking, a position exemplified by India's statement at the Security Council debate in [January 2019](#).

Second, the narrative that conceptualises climate change as a conflict multiplier underappreciates the experiences and interests of the countries that bear the brunt of climate change, which for them can be a matter of life and death. It is no surprise, therefore, that small island developing countries support bringing climate change to the security domain. However, their perspective differs from that of the industrialised countries in Europe and North America. For the small island states, climate change is not so much a threat multiplier but an existential threat. In his address at the 2011 Security Council debate, the [then-president of Nauru](#) declared that climate change "is a threat as great as nuclear proliferation or terrorism". More recently during his visit to the United States in mid-July, the [defence minister of Australia](#), the immediate neighbour of the Pacific islands, specifically recognised climate change as a national security threat.

Broadly speaking, the Asia-Pacific countries vary in their thinking on climate security, and their positions are evolving. Many countries in the Asia-Pacific have reservations about climate security. In 2007 and 2011, China, India, and Indonesia did not support including climate change in Security Council deliberations. This position was probably influenced by the concern that the focus on climate security could lead to the militarisation of climate issues and legitimise political and military interventions.

Some shifts in position have been emerging in the region in recent years, indicating gradual buy-in to the climate-security nexus. Indonesia acknowledged during the 2019 Security Council debate that the security impact of climate change was within the ambit of the Security Council. China, while still expressing reservations about the concept of climate security, suggested at the Security Council meeting in [September 2021](#) that climate change be discussed in country-specific agenda items on a case-by-case basis. Vietnam voted in favour of a draft resolution on integrating climate-related security risk into conflict-prevention strategies in [December 2021](#). Growing recognition of climate security risk and the alternate narrative of climate change as an existential threat constitute the basis for a regional discourse in the Asia-Pacific, although the resistance to bringing climate change to the security domain remains.

### **Green Defence**

The relevance of climate change for the defence establishment, and the concomitant sustainability and capability of its armed forces is another major theme of climate security discourse. In the 2010s, militaries in industrialised countries began to pay

greater attention to their vulnerability to climate change in areas such as infrastructure, equipment, skill, and other resources. Since 2015, the [United States](#), [European Union](#), and [United Kingdom](#) have each issued official documents that investigate the national security implications of climate change and outline the approaches of their respective defence establishments to climate security.

Among the priorities identified in the official defence documents of the industrialised countries and organisations, green defence issues such as the cutting of carbon emission and the strengthening of the adaptability and resilience of their forces and facilities rank highly, given their governments' ambitions to champion global climate action. In addition, those documents highlight the need to meet the increasing demand to support disaster response at home and overseas.

Green defence, however, is less of an issue for countries that face the immediate threat of climate change, such as the small island developing countries. Instead, these tend to prioritise dealing with the effects of climate change, and related international cooperation. The difference in priorities was obvious during the International Institute for Strategic Studies Shangri-La Dialogue 2022. While defence ministers from the Western countries emphasised greening their militaries, the [Fijian defence minister](#) noted that the defence establishments in the Pacific were building their capability to deal with the challenges posed by “cyclones, floods, viruses, and disinformation and misinformation.”

### **Singapore: Potential to Lead Regional Climate Security Discourse**

Countries in the Asia-Pacific have yet to release official documents dedicated to climate security and defence, although some like Australia, Japan, and Singapore have incorporated climate risk in their national security policies in certain ways. This failure to consider climate security could be due to the above-noted sensitivity about militarising the issue of climate change. Nonetheless, countries in the region should consider articulating their climate security strategies, and the role that their militaries play in those strategies, in order to facilitate international cooperation and partnership in dealing with climate-induced security challenges, such as extreme weather events and sea-level rise. Given the importance of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) in regional security cooperation and the urgency of climate security for some regional countries, HADR and climate change can be paired as an entry point for constructing a regional climate security discourse.

Singapore has yet to adopt the notion of climate security in official documents and is still developing its approach to the nexus between climate and defence. Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen noted in 2020 that the military was [not primarily responsible](#) for climate action. Nevertheless, taking an interest in green defence, the country's defence establishment aligns its planning and operations with the national climate strategy and aims to reduce carbon emission growth by two-thirds by 2030.

Given the growing interest in climate security in the region, Singapore should consider developing its official position on the relationship between climate change and security, and its approaches to addressing the relevant security risks, such as climate-induced disaster and territorial change caused by sea-level rise. Apart from green defence, disaster relief should be another component of Singapore's strategy for

climate security, in line with Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat's recognition at a conference in October 2021 that climate-induced disasters have [increased the demand](#) for HADR. As host of the Changi Regional HADR Coordination Centre (RHCC), Singapore already has established channels and networks to promote regional HADR cooperation amid climate change.

In view of the growing interest in climate security in the region, Singapore should use various regional forums to initiate a discourse on climate security that sufficiently appreciates the specific challenges facing Asia-Pacific countries. Such discussions can identify common ground in concerns, approaches, and HADR resources, which could facilitate regional cooperation on climate security.

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