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## **Navigating Climate Security Amid Global Challenges**

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### **SYNOPSIS**

*Geopolitical tensions and increasing politicisation are derailing climate efforts around the world, including by the defence sector. In the face of geopolitical headwinds, there is now an urgent need for Southeast Asian countries to reassess climate security and plan a pathway forward for cooperation on climate action.*

### **COMMENTARY**

With 2024 turning out to be the [hottest year on record](#), climate change continues to dominate the global riskscape. According to the "[2025 Global Risks Report](#)" by the World Economic Forum, extreme weather events rank second on the list of top 10 global risks over the short term and first when looking at the list of global risks over the long term.

Considering that weather events are an acknowledged threat multiplier, militaries have become increasingly involved in climate security, as reflected in their inclusion in a plethora of [government reports and defence white papers](#) from around the world. However, even as the impacts of climate change become ever more severe, challenges, such as the politicisation of climate change, are threatening the momentum for international climate action. In Southeast Asia, where regional climate security initiatives are in their nascent stages and partly reliant on international commitments, this trend makes it critical that present circumstances be reassessed to navigate a way forward.

### **Military as Climate Actors**

By the early 21st century, explicit military recognition of the potential impacts of climate change on national security was emerging, as reflected in the [2006 United States Quadrennial Defense Review](#) and the creation of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

(NATO)'s [Science for Peace and Security \(SPS\) Programme](#). Over the last decade, intensifying impacts of climate change have put pressure on critical military and civilian infrastructure, drawing ever more interest from governments and their militaries.

From [naval bases being affected by sea level rise](#) to [disruptions of global supply chains](#), as well as [increasing global temperatures affecting operations and training](#), military capacity is coming under pressure around the world. The broader operating environments of militaries are also affected, putting increasing pressure on them to respond to such events to support civilian capacities — particularly in terms of disaster response. In fact, the [Military Responses to Climate Hazards Tracker](#) by the Center for Climate & Security estimated that, of at least 251 military deployments in 2024 alone, the vast majority were domestic deployments. These were particularly evident in Southeast Asia, where [militaries are already heavily involved in humanitarian assistance and disaster response \(HADR\) as a usual practice](#), generally in the form of first responders.

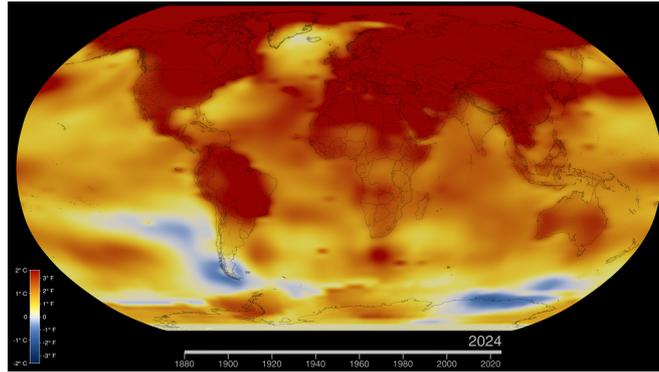
## Challenges to Climate Action

The world's scientists have sounded the red alert, signalling the [increasing urgency](#) of climate action. On the other hand, the [growing politicisation of climate change](#) has made climate action more challenging. While there is a general awareness of the need for military climate action, there is still a prevailing sense that there is a [trade-off between curbing energy use and national security](#) — a call that has become particularly loud in the face of ongoing geopolitical crises, including [Russia's war on Ukraine](#).

Adding to this reluctance to act is the alarming trend of countries seeming to backtrack or retreat on their climate commitments. [Germany](#) seems likely to pull back on green policies after its most recent election, which saw its “climate-ambitious” government voted out. Similarly, [New Zealand](#) has reversed some of its green policies since 2023. Even in Southeast Asia, [Indonesia's special envoy for climate change and energy](#) expressed doubts about the relevance of the Paris Agreement for Indonesia.

Considering its significant role in climate policy, the retreat by the United States is especially worrying. Particularly of concern are its recent high-profile actions such as the [withdrawal from the Paris Agreement](#), the [closing of climate programmes](#) managed by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and [non-participation](#) in the recent meeting of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

This sea change in US climate policies has also extended to the military. A recent statement from the US Department of Defense announcing the military's intention to cut wasteful items from its budget singled out funding for “[so-called 'climate change' and other woke programs](#)”. Similar to the [global gag rule](#) that was instated during the first Trump administration that led to the disruption of abortion-related US health programmes around the world, climate action programmes, including those involving defence cooperation, are therefore likely to be impacted. Considering that “[\[d\]efense mitigation of climate impacts](#)” and other climate policies have been a key line of effort in the US-ASEAN partnership, this development is alarming for Southeast Asia.



2024 was the hottest year on record. Countries around the world, including those in Southeast Asia, must prioritise climate security and strengthen cooperation to combat climate change amid geopolitical challenges. *Image source: NASA's Scientific Visualization Studio.*

## Future Directions

As a region heavily affected by climate change, climate security is a necessity in Southeast Asia. Increasing interest in climate change among militaries in Southeast Asia is probably due to the general tendency of states in the region to turn to their militaries as first responders in a climate disaster, coupled with the likelihood that climate change is driving an increase in the frequency and intensity of natural hazards in the region. Most militaries in Southeast Asia have recognised climate change as a security risk and, in turn, have adopted strategies and operational tactics to manage climate impacts on militaries as part of their [wider national plans](#) — significantly through international cooperation. Regardless of the uncertain future of US commitments to support climate action in the region, Southeast Asian militaries will need to press on with their own cooperation.

ASEAN should look towards developing and strengthening climate collaboration and cooperation activities with other close partners and like-minded states that see climate security as an area of focus. Countries in the broader Indo-Pacific, such as [Australia, Japan, and South Korea](#), have all included climate security in their national security projections.

For example, climate security has been a key area of focus for Japan, as highlighted in the Japanese defence ministry's "[Response Strategy on Climate Change](#)" report and its [National Security Strategy](#). Considering that Japan has a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with ASEAN and has consistently been involved in disaster management in the region, there should be scope for ASEAN to strengthen their partnership to include military-to-military coordination on climate action. Considering that countries such as [Malaysia and the Philippines](#) have already benefitted from Japan's Official Security Assistance, a potential expansion in areas such as decarbonisation could further strengthen ASEAN-Japan ties.

Military cooperation in the region on HADR has continued and will continue within ASEAN-led frameworks such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM). However, considering international trends on climate action, ASEAN countries would need to re-evaluate their national and regional climate security policies. Only by establishing a comprehensive climate security plan that reflects their interests and

ambitions for military contributions to combat climate change and its effects, as well as their engagement with partners, will ASEAN be able to build a sustainable future.

While recent geopolitical upheavals have been distracting and taken up much of the bandwidth of policymakers, Southeast Asia must remain cognisant of the long-term risks arising from climate change. Dealing with climate change will be the defining crisis of this era and concerns over geopolitical upheavals should not allow climate action to be relegated to the margins.

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