[**An undebated aspect**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1644787/an-undebated-aspect)

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THREE weeks in, and the dust is beginning to settle. The Afghan Taliban have announced a government, and the world is starting to move on from the shock of their resurgence to concerns about how they will govern. The imminent humanitarian crisis, especially the threat of starvation for millions of Afghans, is the foremost concern. It highlights the deepening links between conflict and climate change — a trend with equal implications for Pakistan.

With the Taliban takeover, it seems as if engagement on Afghanistan will be securitised for perpetuity. The country will be viewed through lenses of global security and geopolitical rivalries, to the neglect of the most critical 21st-century challenge: climate change.

Temperatures in Afghanistan are rising fast, and parts of the country have warmed double the global average. Droughts are more frequent: the extreme drought of 2018 displaced more people that year than conflict; the current drought has ruined around 40 per cent of the country’s wheat crop. Even before the Taliban’s return, one-third of the population was facing ‘acute food insecurity’, and half the children aged five and under were malnourished.

Droughts — and flash floods, landslides, and desertification, depending which part of the country you look at — have ruined rural livelihoods in a country where more than 60pc of the population rely on agriculture for income. This has directly spurred conflict, with up to 80pc of conflicts in the country linked to natural resources, according to a UN Environment Programme, WFP and Afghan National Environmental Protection Agency study.

The perils of climate change in Afghanistan are being ignored.

The Taliban in recent years have recruited fighters by paying much more than what they could earn through farming in distressed conditions. Moreover, they have exploited the despair — and resulting resentment against poor government support — that Afghans have experienced when faced by the effects of climate change: food and water insecurity, destroyed infrastructure, displacement.

Writing in the New York Times, Somini Sengupta put it well: “…while it would be facile to attribute the conflict in Afghanistan to climate change, the effects of warming act as what military analysts call threat multipliers, amplifying conflicts over water, putting people out of work in a nation whose people largely live off agriculture, while the conflict itself consumes attention and resources.”

The world has perceived the Afghan exodus in recent days as a rejection of repressive Taliban ideology. But this oversimplified narrative ignores the reality that ideology itself is a luxury for many Afghans — many are fleeing in search of food, medicine and jobs.

Pakistan must heed the climate dimension of the Afghan crisis. We have risen to the immediate challenge of supporting the humanitarian effort to get food to the Afghan people. And we are starting to manage the refugee influx. But this is not sustainable. The impact of climate change on agriculture will intensify, leading to more hunger, and more refugees. Pakistan and the global community must support climate adaptation and mitigation measures in Afghanistan to better manage the crisis. This will be essential for Pakistan, itself a climate vulnerable country with impending water and food scarcity challenges, where resentment against refugees and regional food exports are only set to grow, potentially driving conflict.

Monitoring climate impact will also indicate the resilience of the Taliban regime, and the likelihood of further conflict in the country. For example, water scarcity means that women have to travel greater distances to collect water. Taliban restrictions on women’s movement could make many lives untenable, leading to resistance. The Tali­ban’s efforts to manage water rights and distribution could also spark district-level resource conflict.

Afghanistan’s water scarcity may also drive divisions between the new Taliban regime and Pakistan. For example, eager to placate the local population, the Taliban may seek international support to revive dam projects, including controversial projects such as the Indian-funded Shahtoot Dam on the Kabul River that affects downstream supply to Pakistan. Recent comments on the Durand Line suggest the Taliban have no fear of provoking Islamabad.

In all scenarios, Pakistan must learn lessons from Afghanistan’s experience. Climate impact on agriculture, and soaring levels of climate migration, have helped the Taliban gain supporters and discredit Afghanistan’s democratic government, which was failing to manage the crisis. Pakistan in 2020 was ranked the fifth-most climate vulnerable country on the Global Climate Risk Index (Afghanistan doesn’t feature in the top 10). Jacobabad this summer became one of the first places in the world to briefly cross the ‘wet bulb’ temperature threshold that humans can survive. Climate-linked conflict is an inevitability for us too.

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