



JANUARY 2024

HARMONIZING CLIMATE ACTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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INDO PACIFIC PROGRAM

ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

This article argues that there is a need for greater regional, transboundary cooperation on Climate Action in the Indo-Pacific region. It suggests moving beyond a narrow focus on traditional security concerns associated with climate change, especially for military and border security.

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INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific region—home to 60% of the world’s population, and emerging economies and markets, strategic trade/shipping routes, and crucial manufacturing supply chains—is also highly vulnerable to climate change. As the geopolitical, geo-economic, and geostrategic stakes are high in the region, the great, middle, and regional powers have formulated, or at least begun to design, their respective Indo-Pacific strategies, focusing on both national and regional interests. Regional organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), East Asia Summit (EAS), and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) have also begun to recalibrate their positions and policies based on the evolving traditional and non-traditional security strategies in the Indo-Pacific region. Amidst this, climate change has emerged as an integral part of human security strategies and policies. The Indo-Pacific region is essentially more vulnerable to climate change impacts than any part of the world; sea level rise, ocean acidification, typhoons/cyclones, floods, droughts, and heatwaves, which unabated will derail past developmental gains.

THE IMPERATIVES FOR CLIMATE ACTIONS AS A HUMAN SECURITY VALUES

Climate change affects water, food, energy, and livelihood security, and Indo-Pacific countries are working towards building capacities to mitigate, and adapt

to, climate change. At the 2021 Glasgow climate summit, Tuvalu’s Climate security, covering a broad spectrum—including ecological security, human security, and national security—has found its way into Indo-Pacific strategies of the major powers in the region. Within these strategies, the security implications of climate change is highlighted, in terms of biodiversity degradation and loss, threats to development, migration and displacement, food-water energy security nexus, and disasters.

The vulnerabilities are high, but the capabilities of the majority of countries in the Indo-Pacific region are low. Hence, climate actions focus on solutions to deal with these vulnerabilities by strengthening resilience and disaster risk reduction measures, protecting biodiversity hotspots, reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and much more. Furthermore, beyond a narrow focus on traditional security concerns associated with climate change, especially for military and border security, there is a need for greater regional, transboundary cooperation. The transformation towards a climate-resilient society is therefore as much an ethical imperative as the abolition of slavery and the condemnation of child labour.

Climate vulnerability and structural transition should be viewed as the start of a ‘Great Transformation’ towards a sustainable society. First and foremost, it is a political task to overcome the barriers of such a transformation. State actors

need to integrate climate actions as a part of a long-term oriented regulatory framework to ensure that prosperity, democracy and security are achieved with the natural limits of the Earth system in mind. Above all, development paths should be compatible with the 2°C climate protection guardrail agreed upon by the global community at Cancún in 2010. This substantial change in direction must be accomplished before the end of the current decade in order to reduce global GHG emissions to a minimum by 2050, and thereby maintain the possibility of avoiding dangerous climate change.

CLIMATE ACTIONS AND GREAT TRANSFORMATION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The requisite transformation in the Indo-Pacific should encompass profound changes to infrastructures, production processes, regulation systems and lifestyles, and extend to a new kind of interaction between politics, society, science and the economy. Various multi-level path dependencies and obstacles must be overcome. Additionally, the success of climate actions hinges on nation-states prioritizing global cooperation mechanisms over their short-term interests. This shift is crucial for reversing trends, especially in the global economy, and fostering climate resilience and sustainable development. And not least, from a regional “I” perspective, this is also about issues of fairness – issues that need resolving. This ‘Great Transformation’, then, is by no means an

automatism. It depends on ‘organising the unplannable’ if it is to succeed within the available tight timeframe. This is unique in history, as the ‘world’s great transformations’ of the past were the result of gradual evolutionary change. Considering all the challenges associated with the impending transformation, it becomes evident that the forthcoming changes extend well beyond technological and technocratic reforms. It highlights the need for society to establish a new foundation for its operations. This is, in fact, all about a new social contract for a low-carbon and sustainable global economic system. It is grounded in the fundamental idea that individuals, civil societies, states, the global community of states, the economy, and science all share the collective responsibility for preventing hazardous climate change and addressing other threats to humanity within the Earth system.

The social contract consolidates a culture of attentiveness that stems from ecological responsibility, a culture of participation which is a democratic responsibility, and a culture of obligation towards future generations or future responsibility. A crucial aspect of this social contract is the concept of a ‘proactive state.’ A state that not only takes the initiative in setting transformation priorities but also expands avenues for citizen participation. Additionally, it provides the economy with choices that align with sustainability principles. The social contract should also encompass new forms of regional cooperation.

CLIMATE ACTIONS IS TO BE BUILT UPON THREE KEY TRANSITIONS

These pillars should be the starting point for any political agenda on climate change:

Firstly, the energy systems, including the crucial transport sector that serves as the backbone of the entire economy, are experiencing a new surge in growth. This is attributed to the rapid dynamics of development in industrializing countries. It's important to note that the energy sector is responsible for approximately two-thirds of the long-lived greenhouse gas emissions observed today.

Secondly, urban areas, currently responsible for three-quarters of global final energy demand, and whose population will double to 6 billion by 2050.

Thirdly, land-use systems, primarily agriculture and forestry, including deforestation, currently responsible for almost a quarter of global greenhouse gas emissions. Land use must not only meet the challenge of providing sufficient food for a growing and increasingly demanding global population but also address the rising demand resulting from the increased utilization of bioenergy and bio-based raw materials.

In all three of the above, the Indo-Pacific region is still far away from setting a clear course towards sustainability.

Thus far, mitigation actions announced by the majority of governments within the scope of international climate negotiations will certainly not be enough to comply with the 2°C guardrail. Nevertheless, the dynamics of a transformation that is already in progress should not be underestimated. The debate on the limits to growth, ongoing since the 1970s, and the quest for low-carbon development paths have now taken centre-stage in the Indo-Pacific. This opens up opportunities for extending low-carbon experiments, industries, niches and efficiency islands that already exist in many countries, and gives us the chance to enhance the change in economic strategy, from dependence on the use of fossil energy carriers to a low-carbon way of doing business. In a rapidly changing dynamic situation, seemingly modest measures, when considered collectively, can have a substantial impact and catalyze pivotal points of development. Nevertheless, the simultaneous transition to climate smart development in all three fields is a great challenge. These issues can be resolved through innovative business models and financing concepts. A positive fact is that an ever-growing part of the world population is developing value systems that include focusing on the protection of the natural environment, or that this aspect is at least gaining significance. Policy-making should acknowledge this trend, and display added courage when it comes to making pro-climate actions. However, this positive development is hindered by factors that impede a transformation.

The economic model of the past 250 years was almost without exception geared towards the use of fossil energy carriers, with its rules and regulations, research environments, training and qualification systems and social role models, and its foreign, security, development, transport, economic and innovation policies. This complex system must now be fundamentally modified with a view to the decarbonisation of energy systems and radical increases in energy efficiency. John Maynard Keynes put it in a nutshell when describing one of the key challenges of this kind of profound system change: 'The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from old ones.' Moreover, the transformation must be achieved within a very narrow timeframe, which, for complex societies, particularly in the context of international negotiation systems, poses a significant challenge. At the same time, the Indo-Pacific must be willing to act in an anticipatory manner, and on the basis of scientific findings. For this to happen, politics, economy and society must wholeheartedly embrace long-term orientation.

A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT FOR HARMONISED CLIMATE ACTIONS

The concept of a new social contract emphasizes the need for Indo-Pacific countries to collectively shoulder the responsibility for preventing hazardous climate change and addressing other threats to the planet. Firstly, it requires a voluntary limitation of the typical avenues for economic growth. This is to prioritize

affording people in regions already bearing the consequences of our irresponsible actions, especially future generations, the flexibility to navigate their challenges. The transformation needs a proactive state, counterbalanced by extended participation on the part of its citizens. The idea of a social contract takes the original concept found in natural law theories of early modern history one step further, and today's revised edition must address four major challenges:

- Because of progressive economic and cultural globalisation, the nation state can no longer be considered the sole basis for the contractual relationship. Its inhabitants must responsibly take transnational risks and natural dangers, and the legitimate interests of 'third parties', i.e. other members of the world community, into account.
- Traditional contract philosophy presupposed the fictitious belief that all members of a society are equal. Considering the disproportionate distribution of resources and capabilities in today's international community, we must have effective, fair global compensation mechanisms in place.
- The natural environment should be given increased consideration when revising the social contract.
- The contract has to bring two important new protagonists into the equation: the self-organized civil society and the community of scientific experts.

The new social contract is an agreement to change: the global citizenship consents to expecting innovations that have a normative link to the sustainability postulate, and, in exchange, agrees to surrender the instinct to hang on to the established. The guarantor in this virtual contract is a proactive state that involves its citizens in future decisions requisite to the agreement of sustainability targets. This, in turn, is linked to a culture of attentiveness (born of a sense of ecological responsibility), a culture of participation (as a democratic responsibility), and a culture of obligation towards future generations (future responsibility). The contract doesn't advocate for a superficial or resigned acceptance from civil society. Instead, it recognizes civil society as an active partner with shared responsibility for the success of the transformation process. It mobilizes civil society, thereby legitimizing the process. The concept of a proactive state is therefore intertwined with the acknowledgment of civil society, and the innovative forces in the economy, in science, and in administration.

CONCLUSIONS

Even though climate change is acknowledged as a fundamental aspect of Indo-Pacific strategies and approaches, there is still much work to be done to advance climate security cooperation. Even the traditional and human security implications of climate change are not well-defined and accounted for within the many security strategies and architectures released by the major powers of the region. There is a need to conduct a

comprehensive assessment of climate security challenges and responses in the region, not just within the countries, but also through existing regional organizations, and perhaps even new regional mechanisms that could circumvent various geopolitical pressures. Besides, industrialized Indo-Pacific countries and extra-regional players, such as the EU, need to step up to bridge the massive gap in demand and supply of finances for harmonized climate action efforts, particularly adaptation needs of the developing and least developed Indo-Pacific countries in order to prevent climate security challenges from worsening in the future. With climate security being prioritized by the region's countries through their national security strategies and other frameworks, the next logical steps would be to design a participatory and inclusive implementation agenda, invest in both top-down and bottom-up climate security efforts, and sustain them, keeping in view both human and ecological security.