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Climate Change's Growing Threat to Security

Recent climate change talks in Doha were big on rhetoric but lacked substance. That's both sad and familiar, writes Daniel Marks. It's sad because it ignores a slew of recent reports that highlight climate change's growing threat to human security, especially in the case of small island states.

By Daniel Marks for ISN

A Difficult Year

Towards the end of 2012, Typhoon Bopha battered the southern Philippines, killing over 1,000 people. It came several months after Hurricane Sandy ravaged the eastern US, killing over 100 and causing an estimated \$80 billion in damage. Over the corresponding time period, Australia endured its four hottest months on record. The sweltering heat caused bushfires that destroyed thousands of hectares of land.

It is a trend that many policymakers predict will continue for the foreseeable future. In December 2012, for example, the National Intelligence Council (NIC) published its [Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds](#) predicting that climate change will have a profound and adverse effect on security over the coming decades. Climate change is expected to diminish the availability of critical resources such as food, water and energy, which could result in higher rates of malnutrition throughout the developing world. The report also warns that climate change is likely to result in increased migration, particularly in Asia and Africa, and heighten regional hostilities. Finally, the NIC forecasts that disruptive climate-related events, such as Bopha or Sandy, are set to become more likely and could develop into security risks in politically unstable regions.

Arid Talks in the Desert

Despite such gloomy predictions, no new meaningful action was taken by the international community at the most recent climate change talks. From late November to early December last year, just as Bopha battered the Philippines, thousands of senior ministers and government officials assembled at the 18th Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the 8th Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP) in Doha, Qatar. While Doha resulted in some procedural issues being agreed upon, discussions on the most contentious yet important challenges posed by climate change - mitigation, finance, and a post-2020 agreement - bore little fruit. As a result, a number of delegates left the talks wondering if the [UN system provided "cover for leaders to take no meaningful action."](#)

Although a number of developed countries and regional blocs (the European Union, Norway, Australia,

among others) agreed to a second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol (KP) lasting from 2013-2020, the level of ambition was far from high. For instance, the EU refused to go beyond a 20% emissions target, which would barely decrease emissions from today's levels. Moreover, the second commitment period covers only about 15% of global emissions, which means that the KP's extension will not stop overall global emissions from rising.

At the 2009 COP in Copenhagen, it was agreed that developed countries should contribute \$100 billion by 2020 to help developing countries both cut their emissions and adapt to the impact of climate change. However, citing budgetary constraints, developed countries in Doha merely concurred to preserve the same amount of finance they granted from 2010-2012, which is approximately \$10 billion.

Little progress was also made in developing a comprehensive post-2020 agreement aimed at stopping global temperature from rising more than two degrees. The majority of developed and developing countries have widely diverging opinions in terms of vision and responsibilities. At least the parties did agree to discuss the negotiating text in 2014, and in 2015 talks will culminate in Paris where all parties are supposed to settle upon a legally binding global agreement. What is not clear, however, is whether the international community will possess the necessary political will to take action even in 2015.

What could be considered the most promising result of the Doha talks for developing countries is the enshrinement of the concept of "loss and damage" in the UNFCCC for the first time. This refers to the possibility of compensation for vulnerable communities for losses due to climate change. While least developed countries were unsuccessful in their bid to set up an international mechanism to address loss and damage, the conference agreed to discuss a new mechanism at the next COP. This could lead to the most vulnerable countries receiving additional finance, technology, and capacity building. In its current form, however, this mechanism still lacks any legal backing and rich countries will not accept it as a basis for compensation claims. And if, in the future, small states disappear due to rising sea levels, compensation will be meaningless.

A World Without Small Island States?

During Doha, the World Bank released a [report](#) warning that without additional commitments and action to curb emissions the world is likely to warm by more than 3°C above the pre-industrial climate, and could even rise by 4°C as early as the 2060s. Echoing concerns previously raised by the NIC, the World Bank further warned that climate change could result in irreparable damage to biodiversity and the inundation of coastal cities and small island states.

Recognizing the severity of this threat, last month the Marshall Islands and a number of other small island states [urged the U.N. Security Council](#) to recognize that climate change is an international security challenge that endangers their survival. They also asked the Council to support their survival by providing them with access to new technologies and persuade heavy emitters to accelerate their mitigation efforts. During the meeting, [Tony deBrum, a minister and assistant to the President of the Marshall Islands, declared](#) that 35 years after petitioning for independence, his return to the Security Council "to appeal for the survival of my country was "ironic, bizarre perhaps." He also noted that climate change was already damaging the country's food security after wells recently became filled with salt water, thereby decreasing the amount of water available for drinking and food production.

Rays of Hope?

There are signs, however, that the United States is on the verge of stepping up its efforts to address

climate change. In his recent [State of the Union address](#) Barack Obama vowed to curb the US' emissions and implored Congress to adopt a market-based approach to mitigation. He also called for an Energy Security Trust, which would use oil and gas revenues to fund new research and technology and challenged Americans to cut their energy usage by half. Obama now has public backing for such policies. After Sandy, Rasmussen Reports conducted a [nationwide poll](#) that revealed over two-thirds of American voters view global warming as a serious problem, a 22% increase from 2009. Accordingly, many Americans expect the government to take concrete action.

However, the biggest stumbling block in Obama's path to making deep emission cuts, such as through a national carbon pricing regime, are Republicans in Congress who in 2009 prevented a cap-and-trade bill from passing. It may well be the case that negotiations will make greater progress if both sides agree that increasingly extreme weather events, such as Hurricane Sandy, will continue to present a security challenge to the United States over the coming years.

Given the failure so far of the UNFCCC approach, all eyes will now be on the US to see if Obama can succeed in tackling climate change at the national level. If Obama is successful, pressure may increase on other major emitters, such as China and India, to follow suit. This, in turn, may enhance prospects for a better global response to climate change and increased security for the worst affected regions of the world, both of which are likely to be welcomed by small island states

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Evidence from the Frontlines of Climate Change](#)

[Doha/COP 18: Gateway to a New Climate Change Agreement](#)

[A Transitional Climate Summit in Doha](#)

For more information on issues and events that shape our world please visit the ISN's featured [editorial content](#) and the [ISN Blog](#).

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