Track-II diplomacy - Building disaster resilience in Pakistan and India

Dr Shafqat Munir Ahmad\textsuperscript{1}

\textsuperscript{1} The author is a Research Fellow at Sustainable Development Policy Institute.
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1. **Introduction**

Pakistan and India are equally vulnerable to disasters as the two countries have similar geography, climate, and environmental attributes. Both the countries bear losses due to cross-border hydro-climatic disasters and seismic activities. The conflict between Pakistan and India restricts the movement of people, goods and transport across borders. However, climatic hazards and disaster risks exist beyond borders and equally harm both of them. Pakistan is most vulnerable to flash floods and earthquakes while same is the case with India in terms of earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, droughts and cyclones (as it has a large coastline).

In South Asia, heavy monsoon rains and floods played havoc in recent years and the increased intensity of disasters is adversely affecting the region thus undoing the development gains in terms of reducing poverty and hunger. During 1990 -2008, over 750 million people were affected. Among them 230,000 had died and a loss of US$45 billion was incurred; both Pakistan and India have to share major losses (World Bank 2009). Tsunami (2004), earthquake (2005), and droughts, cyclones and floods during the period caused havoc with the lives and livelihood of millions of people in both countries.

According to the United Nations global assessment report on disaster risk 2015, India was incurred an estimated average annual economic loss of $9.8 billion due to disasters (Thakur 2015). Another study by Swiss Re, a leading global reinsurer, indicates that India’s total economic losses from all disasters, including natural and man-made events, stood at around $6.2 billion, i.e. or 6.8 per cent of worldwide losses in 2015, down from $13.4 billion, i.e. 11.9 per cent of global losses in 2014 (In 2015, economic losses 2016). This improvement is seen due to better disaster management and preparedness and use of technology by India.

In 2015, a World Bank report published in collaboration with Pakistan’s National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) highlighted that the average annual economic impact of floods on Pakistan’s economy ranged between $1.2 and $1.8 billion, which is equivalent to between 0.5 and 0.8% of the national gross domestic product (APP 2015). The 2010 flood-related economic losses are reported to be US $10 billion. In Pakistan, a predominant majority of people affected by natural disasters was impacted due to repeated flood events.

The problem is that populations in Pakistan and India are largely impacted by floods which is primarily linked to the cross-border hydro resources management. The lack of trust and political animosity distance them to talk on key issues of common interest such as climatic impacts and resultant disasters. Disasters and hydro hazards are apolitical areas on which both the countries have to work together to save the lives of their people as well as resources. Unfortunately, hardliners on both sides are a big hurdle due to which no concrete steps could be taken despite the fact that a vibrant early flood warning and forecasting system is fully functional and a globally designed 24-hour response mechanism is ready to reach the disaster-hit communities.

2. **Current Initiatives**

Though both Pakistan and India, with a persistent disconnect, show aggressiveness against each other somehow, they do correspond at the regional and global forums. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has greeted Pakistan’s new Prime Minister Imran Khan on the victory of the latter’s party. Both sides expressed the willingness to be connected. The government
functionaries at the disaster management authorities of both countries share their information when they meet at regional and global forums, such as Asian Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (AMCDRR), meetings of the Governing Body of the SAARC Disaster Management Centre and some other similar meetings arranged by the United Nations agencies and International non-governmental organizations (INGOs)\textsuperscript{2}.

On such occasions, disaster management officials from both sides agree to the need to work together to deal with disasters in the region. Both the countries are far ahead of other South Asian neighbours in terms of managing disasters. Both have strong National Disaster Management Authorities (NDMA), National Disaster Management Plans, and Disaster Risk Reduction strategies besides a full-fledged Disaster Management (DM) mechanism from national to states/provinces and local levels. Earlier, the two countries have been undertaking their DM initiatives in line with the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA). In June 2106, India had revised its National Disaster Management Plan in line with the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR). Pakistan has yet to revise its National Disaster Management and Capacity Building Plan according to SFDRR, though it is to be designed until 2022.

2.1. **Pakistan**

In Pakistan, National Disaster Risk Reduction Policy 2013 gives priority to the approaches such as: i) risk knowledge by developing risk and vulnerability atlas / index at national and local level, ii) awareness on disaster risk reduction, iii) climate change adaptation measures, iv) disaster risk insurance, and v) community-based disaster risk management. Pakistan has three-tier disaster management architecture, including National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), Provincial Disaster Management Authorities (PDMAs) and District Disaster Management Authorities (DDMAs) to undertake disaster management functions at national, provincial and local levels. This architecture provides community-based disaster risk reduction and preparedness plans.

National Disaster Risk Reduction Policy 2013 gives priority to women in terms of their role in disaster preparedness and in the risk reduction efforts. The NDMA has set up a gender and child cell at the authority, which analyses disasters with gender and child lens so that maximum protection could be provided to them as disaster risks are differently viewed when it comes to women and children as per their specific needs.

The NDMA has prepared a disaster risk insurance plan that covers loss of human lives, livelihoods, shelter and livestock. This would be the biggest insurance venture in the world. District risk insurances, including agriculture, livestock and small business, are also part of the plan. The National Disaster Management and Capability Building Plan covers complete spectrum of disasters, including: pre, during and post disaster phases; and it steers institutional and technical direction of disaster risk management. Early warning system, multi-hazard risk atlas and provincial and national contingency plans are in process. Pakistan is quite advanced in terms of legislation and formation of rules and procedures to implement the disaster management plans and strategies. The National Disaster Management Act, 2010 provides legal framework for the functioning of existing disaster management system at all levels.

2.2. **India**

India has revised its National Disaster Management Plan (NDMP) in June 2016 in line with the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction to make India disaster resilient and to reduce
loss of lives and assets. The plan embeds four priority themes of the Sendai Framework: i) understanding disaster risk, ii) improving disaster risk governance, iii) investing in disaster risk reduction (through structural and non-structural measures) and iv) disaster preparedness, early warning and building back better in the aftermath of a disaster. The plan also enlists a series of activities such as early warning, information dissemination, medical care, fuel, transportation, search, rescue, and evacuation. It also provides a framework for recovery and building back better.

Amid vulnerability to diverse kinds of disasters with more than 58.6 per cent of the land on the fault line, over 12% prone to floods and river erosion and huge cultivable land’s vulnerability to drought and 5,700 kilometres out of 7,516 km long coastline, which is prone to cyclones and tsunamis, India has developed its disaster management system in a way that it could manage a diverse range of disasters (National Disaster Management Authority [NDMA] n.d.). The disaster management architecture in India has developed a system of mapping vulnerabilities, hazards and risks so that communities are prepared to become resilient against such vulnerabilities.

The architecture well recognizes the role of women in disaster management and it has duly acknowledged the well-researched proposition that women and children, elderly and people with disability, do have their specific needs in terms of disaster preparedness and risk reduction and they deserve to be seen differently in terms of their needs in the disaster management cycle.

3. **Way Forward**

3.1. **Lessons learnt from success stories from both side: Sharing capacities**

Both Pakistan and India have developed their disaster management systems and specialised in response, rehabilitation and rebuilding. More work is being done to make communities prepared and resilient against disasters and climatic hazards. Both countries have exhibited their strengths, specializations, and leverages in 2015 earthquake in Nepal. Pakistan had provided state-of-the-art emergencies hospitalisation and India provided rescue and response services. When both Pakistan and India can support Nepal, why not they can support each other to ensure a response to disaster-hit communities within 24 hours.

Pakistan and India can collaborate to save lives while any disaster-hit communities, either most probably bilaterally or through operationalising the disaster response mechanism under SAARC. The triggering effect of climate change necessitates an urgency for a bilateral response to make the people of both countries resilient against all kinds of disasters occurring across the borders.

On the occasion of 18th SAARC summit held in Nepal in November 2014), the prime ministers of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India stressed the need to take serious measure to cope with the frequent disasters due to which millions of people remain at risk in the region. These leaders duly mentioned the necessities for a cross-border response within the already agreed regional instruments, namely the ‘SAARC Comprehensive Framework for Disaster Management’ and ‘SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters’.

Even prior to the 18th Summit, Indian prime minister offered Pakistan humanitarian support in September 2014 when floods hit Pakistan, especially Kashmir regions. Indian side had timely informed Pakistan about the forthcoming floods for this period and Pakistan managed the floods
accordingly and suffered less losses (As floods crisis spreads 2014). This practice needs to be continued between India and Pakistan.

3.2. **Areas for cooperation/collaborations: Early warning and flood forecasting system between Pakistan and India**

Himalayan ecosystem, which is enriched with huge water resources, benefit the Himalaya communities as their lifeline on the one hand and on the other causes heavy floods due to receding glaciers. If both Pakistan and India pool their capacities to build a state-of-the-art early warning and flood forecasting system, they can save the lives of millions of people, who are at risk. As mentioned above, the timely sharing of information by India in September 2014 on water flows down to Pakistani plains saved the communities from high intensity floods.

Using their existing capacities and resources, both the countries can support communities across the border to know risks of disasters, to monitor, analyse and forecast hazards, to further disseminate alerts and warning to their fellow members, and to build local capacities in line with the spirit of Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction.

3.3. **Benefitting from Track-II processes**

In the absence of cordiality between Pakistan and India, the friends of people of both countries try to open channels other than the official ones so that issues that require urgent attention to protect millions against disasters and climate hazards by building their resilience and coping mechanisms might be highlighted and raised before the two governments. Disasters and climate hazards are the ones that cannot be left unattended even in the case of worst kind of animosity. Unfortunately, the postponement of the 19th SAARC summit, which was scheduled to take place in November 2016, proved to be a blow to the citizens-led efforts as Track-II initiatives on resilience building against disasters and climate hazards.

The hbs-led India-Pakistan Track II dialogue on building climate resilience issued a Delhi Declaration that was supposed to be presented to the SAARC leaders on the occasion of the 19th Summit, but it was postponed The Delhi Declaration includes the following key points:

- Facilitate timely access to public data
- Focus on taking small concrete steps rather than setting unattainable goals
- Scale up and share information on best practice cases
- Create a bilateral consortium of water stakeholders
- Look into the possibility of creating a regional energy grid
- Develop better early warning systems and communicate risk signals in the region
- Facilitating people-to-people interaction, including youth, journalist, local governments, research institutions, private sector and civil society organizations to build trust and foster peace

An SDPI-led dialogue process to improve the regional cooperation (especially between Pakistan and India) on disasters and hazards was held on 11th August 2016 in collaboration with the World Bank offices in Pakistan. The process was undertaken ahead of the 19th SAARC summit which was postponed. Though the postponement had been a setback but the dialogue process produced some key points, which are still valid to be taken up by the South Asian leaders. The points are as follows:
Cross-border timely early warning with correct information - data sharing on floods and disasters - Weather Radar
Best practices on disaster management from the two countries should be replicated.
Droughts should be given equal importance - Sindh drought
Looking at storm trends and causes of floods, such as monsoon patterns, to see the trends for a coordinated disaster management
Loss and damages monitoring mechanism need to be put in place.
Meeting global commitments to reduce disaster losses
There is a need for exchange visits of environmentalists, climate experts, scientists and policy specialists of the two countries.
State-of-the-art satellite data sharing
Better community (Micro-level) based disaster risk management (CBDRM)
Connecting Climate Change Adaptation with DRR initiatives to build resilience of communities and member countries of SAARC.
Risk informed investments for sustainable development on both sides of the border between Pakistan and India

4. **What to avoid and what to do next?**

In the light of the above discussion and process, both Pakistan and India should avoid the following gestures:

- Politicization of disasters and vulnerabilities across the borders
- Territorial blame game when it comes to emergency response
- Wasting huge sums to block peace processes
- Isolationist approach in handling disasters
- Point scoring in media coverage of disasters
- Blocking disaster management experts’ movement across the borders

On the installation of new government in Pakistan led by Prime Minister Imran Khan, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi felicitated his counterpart. Many political pandits thought that it would be a new opening to revive the stalled dialogue process between the two countries. But, this felicitation proved to be a ritual and failed to make any headway. Even almost a scheduled meeting between foreign ministers of both the countries on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September 2018 was cancelled. When there is a stalemate in the relations at the governments level, still track-II has a room to make former military and civilian leaders from two sides to sit together to pave way for the resumption of formal talks at least on the front of climate change and disasters, which do not confine to boundaries and do not necessarily follow policy stands of respective governments. The track-II process must involve humanitarian and climate experts on their panels to highlight the miseries the people of both countries may face if the two did not take timely steps to adapt to climatic changes and early warn the vulnerable communities to achieve the objective of a 24-hour response to any future disaster and the Sustainable Development Goals to build resilience of the people against disasters and climate change.
References


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