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Climate change has “enormous” geopolitical implications in the Himalayas, particularly in the region between India and Pakistan, where destabilisation of water flows make the area ripe not just for conflict but also for devastation, a top US Senator has warned.

Noting that Pakistan's major rivers are all fed by glacial meltwater from India, Senator Sheldon Whitehouse told a Washington audience this week that more melting meant more flow, and climate change also can intensify heavy rains during the monsoon season.

Referring to a study, he said even an optimistic scenario on climate change would cut the Himalayan glacier mass more than a third by 2100.

Business as usual means loss of nearly 70 per cent of glacier mass, Whitehouse said, adding that “because they are melting, the glaciers are also shrinking”.

“This has enormous geopolitical implications,” he said in his key note address to The Hudson Institute, a top US think-tank, on the release of a report “An Integrated Approach to the Himalayas”.

“In the region, relations between Pakistan and India have long been fraught; in human history, violent conflicts over water are as old as memory; Kashmir is a crucible of contest for riparian control of great rivers; and climate change is destabilising water flows. The result of this combination is a region ripe for conflict, even devastation,” he said.

At some point, the swell of added meltwater is offset by the shrinkage of the glacier, and the system veers from flood toward drought. As glaciers in the Western Himalayas continue to disappear, the runoff that supplies Pakistan's rivers could drop by 40 to 50 per cent, he noted.

“On top of all of this, India is planning to build dams on the Chenab River in volatile Kashmir, through which the river flows downstream to Pakistan. Pakistan fears India pinching the Chenab's flow to put pressure on Islamabad, especially in times of heightened conflict.

“Suspensions of riparian mischief run high, and partition-era memories linger. Food security, power generation and public safety are all at stake, giving nuclear-armed adversaries a lot to fight over,” Whitehouse said.

The report, produced by a working group of seven US-based experts on Asia, lays out a plan for the US to pursue an integrated approach with friendly states in the Himalayas to address strategic and population security issues, regional connectivity, water usage, climate change and cultural preservation, besides the protection of women and minorities.

Aparna Pande, director of Hudson's India Initiative, said that weak states and contested sovereignties across the Himalayas have induced a number of regional actors to seek deeper physical and economic connectivity within the region through new infrastructure that supports transportation needs, trade and commerce, and access to resources.

“However, longstanding border disputes and rivalries mean that efforts to foster greater connectivity in the Himalayas are laden with geopolitical significance,” she said.

Pande noted that till recently the US had preferred to adopt a ‘hands-off’ approach but the Hudson report recommends that it should engage in a more hands-on role in regional connectivity schemes to promote American interests.



She said the US would benefit by supporting and expanding the Quality Infrastructure Initiative (QII) developed by Japan as an alternative to Chinese-led initiatives like the One Belt and One Road (OBOR) and the Belt and Road (BRI).

Jeff Smith, Research Fellow on South Asia at The Heritage Foundation said, India's relationships with many of its neighbours have improved, particularly with Bangladesh, but not with China and Pakistan.

Chinese incursions in Ladakh, control of Gwadar port in Pakistan, military base in Djibouti and the recent Doklam standoff have created avenues for friction and competition between China and India, he said.

Smith also criticised Pakistan for its role in supporting “insurgencies, terrorist groups operating within Pakistan targeting India, Afghanistan and the US”.

Smith said while he did not see Pakistan taking a fundamentally different approach towards terrorists within its borders, Smith said he does see the US taking a different approach as was clear from the statements by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense James Mattis.

Their statements show greater willingness from the US to use transactional approach in conveying to Pakistan that if there are not results, then there will be costs to pay, he said.

Michael Kugelman, Senior Associate for South Asia at Wilison Center, said that “water can become a weapon in regional geopolitics”.

In its report, Hudson Institute recommends the Trump administration to pursue closer ties with India to help balance an assertive China, reduce Indo-Chinese tensions and demonstrate to Pakistan the severe consequences for supporting extremism.

It also urges US to engage in a more hands-on approach regarding trans-Himalayan connectivity to support development that serves the people of the region.

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