LIBERAL JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE REVIEW
An International Double-Blind Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-3175 | ISSN (Print): 3006-3167
Volume 5, Issue 8 October, 2026

CLIMATE CHANGE AS A THREAT MULTIPLIER: THE SECURITY-JUSTICE NEXUS IN PAKISTAN

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23497137

Keywords
Climate Change, Threat Multiplier, Security Justice Nexus, Catastrophic Floods, National Stability

Article History
Received: *25 June 2026*
Accepted: *16 September 2026*
Published: *20 October 2026*

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze climate change as a threat multiplier within Pakistan's security justice nexus by examining its impacts on water security food security displacement and vulnerable communities while evaluating climate securitization judicial interventions and governance gaps in promoting climate justice. Climate change is a significant threat multiplier in Pakistan exacerbating existing vulnerabilities of water scarcity food insecurity extreme weather events internal displacement and governance weaknesses while converging with human security and justice issues. The study draws on secondary data from policy documents judicial verdicts and scholarly analyses to elucidate how climate stresses exacerbate socioeconomic fragilities and challenge state capacities. Special focus is directed toward the security justice nexus covering human security aspects securitization processes and the contribution of constitutional rights to climate justice. The analysis highlights that Pakistan is responsible for less than one per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions yet ranks among the most vulnerable countries to climate impacts as evidenced by the catastrophic floods of 2022 that affected more than thirty three million people and caused damages exceeding fourteen billion dollars. Through a qualitative examination of literature national security policies and landmark cases such as Asghar Leghari versus Federation of Pakistan the article identifies significant gaps in institutional coordination and policy implementation. It concludes that addressing climate change requires whole of government approaches with increased adaptation financing and fair burden sharing grounded in climate justice principles to protect human dignity and national stability.

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is increasingly affecting environmental degradation, which has grown from a peripheral issue into a core component of national and human security concerns in the Global

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Volume 5, Issue 8 October, 2026

South in recent years, and is especially severe in Pakistan. The impacts of climate change are not an isolated phenomenon, but compound existing stresses on resources scarcity, poverty, poor infrastructure and institutional constraints, thus creating cascading effects on livelihoods, social cohesion and state legitimacy (Rüttinger et al., 2015; Mach et al., 2019). Changes in temperature, precipitation, and glacial melt in Pakistan, where the economy is still extremely dependent on agriculture, and the majority of food production is dependent on the Indus Basin irrigation system is an existential threat to water and food systems (Qureshi, 2020; Immerzeel et al., 2020). Climate change as a threat multiplier, a term used in military and security analyses, refers to the way that climates can exacerbate rather than directly cause conflict or instability (CNA Military Advisory Board 2007). In Pakistan, this multiplier effect is seen in the escalation of competition for limited water supplies, increased food security after disaster events, and widespread internal displacement, resulting in stress on urban areas and the provision of services (Saeed, 2023).

Concurrently, the security aspects of climate change are interlinked with justice issues (Sultana, 2022). In Pakistan, smallholder farmers, women in rural areas, and people living in flood-prone districts are the most vulnerable groups, who face disproportionate impacts despite the small emissions contribution in the past (Ahmad & Khan, 2024). Judicial interventions have started to make inaction on climate a violation of basic constitutional rights to life and dignity, thus bringing security issues into the picture of equity and accountability (2015, Lahore High Court). While the National Security Policy of 2022 to 2026 acknowledges climate change as a non-traditional security threat impacting economic security and human security, there are considerable gaps between the recognition of climate change as a security threat and the actual implementation (Government of Pakistan, 2022). This article explores the security-justice nexus in the context of Pakistan by examining the impact of the climate change on threats in physical, human and institutional front, as well as the possibilities for more integrated responses. This discussion takes turns by examining relevant literature, articulating a problem statement, establishing objectives and research questions, outlining a methodological approach that utilizes qualitative analysis, and four substantive sections: physical impacts, human security, securitization and justice, and governance pathways.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a growing trend to view climate change as a threat multiplier, a factor that contributes to existing vulnerabilities, rather than a threat on its own. Scholarly and policy literature has increasingly come to think of climate change as a threat multiplier that adds to existing vulnerabilities, rather than a threat in and of itself. The first articulation of this idea came in the 2007 report by the CNA Military Advisory Board that suggested that anticipated climate change would significantly worsen the situation for some of the world's least developed states in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, which would then be more prone to political instability. This has been developed over time to highlight the interplay between climate stressors and other factors like governance, inequality and resource dependence (Dalby, 2020; Floyd, 2010). In South Asia, the threat multiplier approach has been used to understand the relationship between temperature anomalies, extreme weather, and political stability measures, with significant negative correlations observed in some nations like Pakistan and Afghanistan (Naz & Ahmad, 2026).

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In Pakistan-specific scholarship, the way in which climate change exacerbates the threats to water security, food systems and human mobility is well documented in several studies (Mustafa et al., 2021). The Indus Basin analysis shows that the dual stresses of faster glacial melt in the Hindu Kush-Karakoram-Himalaya (HKKH) region and increased climatic variability to monsoon rainfall, are reducing the predictability of river flows, impacting the food security of a large fraction of the population engaged in irrigation dependent agriculture (Nanditha & Mishra, 2022). The 2022 floods that submerged vast areas of the nation and uprooted almost a million people have been comprehensively reviewed as a real-life case study on the multiplier effect, and the estimated damages and losses exceed thirty billion dollars (World Bank et al., 2022). The human security aspects have also been covered in the literature, as the impacts of climate change on livelihoods lead people to migrate to urban areas or to experience protracted displacement, putting additional pressure on public health systems and creating secondary social tensions (Khan & Bowen, 2023).

The theory of securitization also offers another perspective on how climate change has been securitized in national security discourses (Rabbani, 2026). The National Security Policy 2022-2026 is a significant move toward rhetorical acknowledgment of climate change as a major non-traditional threat to Pakistan's security, which was also interpreted as a threat to its economic and human security; however, the scholars noted that the framing of climate change as a threat is still partial and development-oriented instead of a full inclusion in the operational planning of security. A number of parallel literature sources highlight how impacts are inequitably distributed and how domestic courts can contribute to the cause of climate justice through the pursuit of rights-based claims (Atapattu, 2020; Peel & Osofsky, 2018). The Asghar Leghari case (2015) in the Lahore High Court was of landmark significance for the court to rule that the delay on the part of the government to execute the National Climate Change Policy was a violation of the fundamental rights guaranteed under the Constitution and to form a Climate Change Commission to monitor the progress (Hassan & Qureshi, 2023). A wider assessment of the legal system in Pakistan highlights institutional weaknesses, weak law enforcement and lack of representation of vulnerable groups as ongoing challenges in the field of climate justice (Rajamani, 2020). Together, this work argues that climate change acts as a threat multiplier, with far-reaching consequences for security and justice in Pakistan, and that greater integration of analytical approaches is needed that link physical impacts, human security outcomes, securitization processes, and judicial interventions (Schlosberg, 2013).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although linkages between climate change and security have become evident, policy and institutional responses in Pakistan remain fragmented and inadequate for addressing overlapping challenges of resource depletion, human insecurity, and justice gaps. Despite contributing less than one percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, Pakistan ranks among the most climate vulnerable countries, as shown by its top position on the Germanwatch Climate Risk Index for 2022. The 2022 floods affected approximately thirty three million people and generated damages exceeding fourteen billion dollars according to the Post Disaster Needs Assessment, intensifying water stress in the Indus Basin and worsening food insecurity. Recognition of climate change in the National Security Policy has not produced effective

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coordination or mainstreaming of climate risk, while judicial advances face implementation barriers and vulnerable populations experience these gaps most acutely. The central problem is that climate change is not addressed as an integrated security justice issue requiring simultaneous attention to physical risk reduction, human security protection, and rights based accountability. Without such integration, climate stresses will continue to multiply existing vulnerabilities and erode public confidence in state institutions.

OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze how climate change functions as a threat multiplier in Pakistan by examining its physical impacts on water systems, food security, and extreme weather events.
2. To assess the human security consequences of climate-related stresses, particularly displacement, livelihood loss, and differentiated vulnerabilities among marginalized groups, while evaluating processes of securitization and judicial interventions.
3. To identify governance gaps and propose integrated policy and institutional pathways that connect climate security with climate justice in Pakistan.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does climate change operate as a threat multiplier that intensifies water scarcity, food insecurity, and extreme weather impacts in Pakistan?
2. In what ways do climate-related stresses affect human security, especially for displaced and marginalized communities, and how have securitization and judicial processes addressed the resulting security-justice concerns?
3. What institutional and governance reforms are required to advance an integrated climate security and climate justice agenda in Pakistan?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article uses a qualitative research method of systematic review and thematic analysis of secondary information. The relevant literatures were identified by specific selection of academic database search, policy repository and institutional reports, which include priority literature from the peer-reviewed articles, government document and assessments by international organizations. The key documents looked into were the National Security Policy (2022-2026), the Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) for the 2022 floods, the judgement of Asghar Leghari versus Federation of Pakistan, and various studies on the threat multiplier concept in Pakistan. Thematic organization of data was done along four dimensions: physical impacts, human security outcomes, securitization processes, and justice dimensions. The analysis is interpretive and collates or synthesizes existing evidence and recognise that this is limited by the use of publically available information and because climate impacts are constantly changing. Ethical questions involve the proper representation of cited material and statements that go beyond supporting evidence. This way, the linkage between the two concepts of security and justice can be analysed in full, while preserving the integrity of empirical research and policy.

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CLIMATE CHANGE AS A THREAT MULTIPLIER

The challenge of climate change further compounds threats to the country's water resources, by disrupting the Indus Basin's hydrological cycle, which provides water to agriculture, energy and domestic needs. The Hindu Kush-Karakoram-Himalaya region has thousands of glaciers, and glacial melt water forms a significant portion of flows in these rivers, but glacial retreat is being amplified by warming temperatures and glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs) are occurring more frequently (Immerzeel et al., 2020). These modifications are taking place alongside the monsoon's growing variability in rainfall, causing both extended dry periods and abrupt extreme rains (Nanditha & Mishra, 2022). Water availability per capita has already dropped below a threshold of 1000 m3/capita, which is considered to be water scarce, and is expected to continue decreasing with ongoing warming (Briscoe, 2019). The problem is amplified by a limited amount of reservoir storage, with an equivalent of just approximately thirty days of river flow.

Agriculture, which contributes large amounts of gross domestic product and sustains a considerable proportion of the population, is directly affected by yield losses due to the effects of heat stress, changed sowing schedules and water shortages (Saeed & Ahmad, 2024). In particular, wheat, as the primary crop, is very sensitive, and it has been reported that yields drop by 10–15 percent for every degree Celsius increase. Due to the flooding in 2022, a significant portion of agricultural land was washed away, particularly in Sindh and Balochistan, resulting in substantial losses in agriculture production amounting to several billion dollars, which contributed to rising food prices and decreasing household food stocks (World Bank et al., 2022). The following seasons have seen continued below-average yields associated with moisture stress and irrigation deficits (FAO, 2023). These physical effects are not limited to rural sectors of the economy. They lead to energy insecurity, as hydropower generation can be hampered during droughts and dry periods; and to public health threats, through increased exposure to water-borne diseases after floods, and to heat-related diseases after heat events (Jabeen et al., 2023).

The threat multiplier logic is made apparent when these climatic risks combine with structural constraints. Reduced or irregular flows, combined with inadequate infrastructure maintenance, inefficient water use and interprovincial allocation conflicts increase the impact (Mustafa et al., 2021). Without significant adaptation investments, the impacts of climate change thus shift manageable resource pressures to systemic risks which weaken food availability, rural income generation and the overall economic underpinnings of stability and national resilience (Mach et al., 2019). According to recent evaluations, the problems remain, such as the expected water scarcity during crucial growing periods and the continued risk of districts being flooded (Germanwatch, 2025). This is not only a technical problem (e.g. better water storage, climate resistant crop varieties, etc.) but also one of resource scarcity as a security problem that has broad social and political implications (Rüttinger et al., 2015).

HUMAN SECURITY DIMENSIONS OF CLIMATE STRESSES AND DISPLACEMENT

The physical effects of climate change also have direct human security implications as they negatively affect the ability of people and communities to survive and be dignified in Pakistan everyday (Barnett & Adger, 2007). The threat of climate change reducing livelihoods and causing displacement is especially damaging to human security, which is defined as protection from

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chronic threats like hunger, disease, and displacement (Sultana, 2022). The 2022 floods forced some eight million people to flee their homes, livestock and basic services, creating long-term humanitarian needs beyond the emergency response phase. Extreme events have continued to impact millions of people in various parts of Pakistan in subsequent years, with reports of over eleven million individuals facing acute food insecurity in recent times, particularly in flood-prone districts of Balochistan, Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (FAO, 2023).

These impact vulnerable groups to a greater extent (Ahmad & Khan, 2024). The risks of malnutrition, school dropouts and gender-based violence are increased for women and children in displacement situation, and smallholder farmers and pastoral families lose the assets that they depend on as their means of living (Saeed, 2023). Internal migration to urban areas increases the strain on existing housing, water and health system infrastructure which may add to primary complaints if host communities feel competition over limited resources (Mustafa et al., 2021). In addition to the other challenges that health systems face, floods disrupt healthcare infrastructure, and provide conditions for outbreaks of diarrheal diseases, malaria and other vector-borne diseases (Khan & Bowen, 2023). Heatwaves also increase the danger to the lives of outdoor workers and senior citizens, revealing the multi-layered nature of climate insecurity for people.

In these results, the threat multiplier is demonstrated in the human security dimension. Climate stresses do not cause poverty or inequality in and of themselves but exacerbate the existing conditions of poverty and inequality and countries' shock absorption potential is limited, as is household and local institutional capacity and buffers (Schlosberg, 2013). Where multiple climate events drive people into cycles of indebtedness and asset depletion and put them in a permanent state of vulnerability, this is taking place in regions that are already identified as having weak social protection and limited adaptive capacity (Jabeen et al., 2023). Security effects are not just on a personal level, they are also on a social level and on the state's resources for relief and recovery assistance (Dalby, 2020). Proactive measures in response to climate change need to thus explicitly support the most vulnerable groups, such as anticipatory cash transfer, rebuilding housing, and gender-sensitive DRR that takes into account the differentiated climate effects.

SECURITIZATION PROCESSES AND THE SECURITY-JUSTICE NEXUS

In Pakistan, the process of securitization is not finished and contested yet it has entered the Pakistani security discourse as an existential threat that needs immediate policy attention (Floyd, 2010; Rabbani, 2026). The National Security Policy 2022-2026 is an important development as it clearly states that climate change is a non-traditional security threat, not just to national security but to economic security, water security and human security; and also emphasizes the need for a climate resilient Pakistan with emphasis on adaptation and Disaster Preparedness. This framing fits in with the general threat multiplier view and also indicates an effort to move the climate issue away from the environment ministry. Yet, academic evaluations suggest that securitization has been primarily symbolic and not yet translated into a process of security institutionalization with respect to coordination, resource distribution or operational preparation in security institutions (Naz & Ahmad, 2026). The integration of institutions remains limited due to

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institutional fragmentation, competing traditional security needs and limited capacity (Khan & Bowen, 2023).

In parallel, the judiciary has taken a rights-based perspective which has enhanced the justice component of the security nexus (Atapattu, 2020). The Lahore High Court in the Asghar Leghari case held that the government's lack of action on the National Climate Change Policy and the framework violates the fundamental rights to life and dignity of the people as guaranteed by the Constitution. The court recommended the appointment of climate change focal points in ministries and the creation of a Climate Change Commission to keep track of efforts, thereby formalizing judicial oversight of climate change efforts. Follow-up reporting showed partial realisation of priority actions and the case was seen as a precedent case, in the Global South, connecting environmental protection to constitutional rights, and was one of the first and influential such cases (Peel & Osofsky, 2018; Hassan & Qureshi, 2023). Further judicial rulings have reiterated the idea of environmental constitutionalism and the obligation to avoid causing 'significant harm' (Rajamani, 2020).

At the point where these developments intersect, the security-justice nexus comes into existence. Securitization can be a tool for resource and political mobilization, but it can also default to the agenda of state stability rather than the rights and needs of vulnerable groups if there is no corresponding justice process. Rights-based litigation, on the other hand, can force governments into action and will draw attention to issues of equity, such as the disproportionate effects on less-emitter communities (Okereke & Coventry, 2016). Securitization processes need to integrate ideas of climate justice, including equitable access to adaptation resources, and meaningful involvement of impacted communities in decision-making. There is a significant mismatch between the acknowledgement of climate change as a security challenge and the delivery of 'just security outcomes' today, which highlights the necessity for greater coherence in the linkages between national security planning, climate policy implementations and constitutional accountability (Naz & Ahmad, 2026; Rabbani, 2026).

INTERSECTIONAL CHALLENGES, GOVERNANCE GAPS, AND PATHWAYS FOR INTEGRATED RESPONSES

The governance challenges are exacerbated by climate stresses, and are not successfully addressed by conventional security approaches nor by environmental policies alone (Dalby, 2020). There is still weak and inadequate coordination at the federal-provincial level, particularly in the allocation of water resources and in disaster response; and capacity is still limited to absorb climate finance, with institutional constraints and competing financial pressures (Saeed & Ahmad, 2024). Despite the efforts of the judiciary, the policy and its implementation are disjointed, and adaptation is not being fully implemented (Hassan & Qureshi, 2023). But the game of adaptive management becomes more difficult and becomes caught up in interprovincial water disputes, and trans-border concerns over the Indus Waters Treaty, with the gains in hydrological variability. These governance gaps exacerbate the threat multiplier effect by slowing recovery investments in risk reduction and by disproportionately allocating recovery resources (Briscoe, 2019).

There are pathways to more integrated responses that focus on mainstreaming climate risk into the security, development and justice institutions. The institutional frameworks set up through

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the Climate Change Commission and Standing Committee approach can be enhanced by strengthening the monitoring and accountability processes (Rajamani, 2020). The integration of the climate scenario analysis into national security planning and in provincial development plans would help to reduce its reactive nature and to enable anticipatory actions (Rüttinger et al., 2015). Improvements in access to international climate finance, including loss and damage mechanisms, plus equitable and transparent subnational allocation of resources, tackle resource issues and equity concerns (Okereke & Coventry, 2016). Complementary action at the local level, which relies on local knowledge and is geared towards the most vulnerable groups, can enhance top-down policy. Water management and water forecasting cooperation, based on shared climate information, facilitate further opportunities to mitigate tensions caused by water scarcity (Immerzeel et al., 2020).

In addition, there is a need for a paradigm shift from fragmented, sectoral interventions to whole-of-government and whole-of-society interventions in order to address climate change as a security-justice challenge (Naz & Ahmad, 2026). They acknowledge the importance of the human security and climate justice as part of national security, not an afterthought (Schlosberg, 2013). Pakistan can mitigate the adverse effects of climate change by addressing physical risks, safeguarding vulnerable groups, incorporating the principles of justice in the securitization process and filling gaps in governance to increase its resilience to future shocks (Saeed & Ahmad, 2024).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish an inter-ministerial Climate Security Coordination Cell to integrate climate risk into national security planning and improve federal provincial coordination.
2. Develop climate resilient water infrastructure with greater storage capacity and efficient irrigation to reduce Indus Basin water stress and flood drought risks.
3. Expand social protection programs with anticipatory cash transfers and livelihood support for women farmers and displaced communities.
4. Strengthen National Climate Change Policy implementation through clear accountability and regular reporting to an oversight body.
5. Enhance judicial capacity on climate justice via specialized training and dedicated environmental benches for better rights enforcement.
6. Increase access to international climate finance including the Loss and Damage Fund with transparent allocation to vulnerable areas.
7. Mainstream climate risk into provincial land use planning to prevent construction in high risk flood zones and protect farmland.
8. Scale up community based early warning and disaster preparedness programs in flood and drought prone regions.
9. Promote climate smart agriculture with support for resistant crop varieties extension services and credit access for small farmers.
10. Strengthen regional cooperation on shared water resources and climate data to manage variability and reduce water related tensions.

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CONCLUSION

Climate change is a significant threat multiplier in Pakistan that aggravates the stresses of water and food systems, affects mass migration, exacerbates human security issues, and highlights systemic governance and justice gaps. The devastating floods of 2022 and the consistent occurrence of extreme weather events make it clear that these trends have real human and economic impacts, and the country's limited greenhouse gas emissions make it clear that this disproportionate exposure is unjust. The recognition of climate change as a security threat in the National Security Policy and in landmark judicial cases, including Asghar Leghari, has further progressed the concept of climate change as a security and rights problem but there are gaps in implementation.

The findings demonstrate that Pakistan's exposure to climate change is not only a geophysical matter, but also a structural inequality, institutional fragility and governance deficit, which emphasizes the climatic stressors as a cascading security threat. The Indus Basin has been projected to be at risk of water shortage due to the melting glaciers and short fall in monsoon rains, which could impact food security and agri-products of millions of people whose livelihoods depend on agriculture. These physical impacts are immediately reflected in human insecurity, such as displacement, the loss of assets and greater vulnerability of women, children and marginalised groups that emit the least but suffer the most. While the securitization of climate change in national security discourse in Pakistan is an important step in conceptualization, its absence will result in lack of protection of the rights and dignity of the affected people without the justice mechanisms. A few judicial interventions have started to fill this gap, introducing constitutional accountability for climate action, but enforcement issues and institutional resistance remain to be addressed to maximize the transformative power of judicial interventions. This requires a paradigm shift in policy and institutional responses by more broadly incorporating climate security into policy and institutional responses and ensuring that the interlinkages of climate security and climate justice are also reflected. This means that the federal-provincial coordination mechanisms need to be strengthened to enable coordinated action at all levels of government to implement adaptation strategies. It demands substantial resources, international resources, such as the Loss and Damage fund with a clear and equitable distribution towards the most vulnerable groups, for adaptation, including through the international channels. It calls for incorporation of climate scenarios in the national security planning and in the national development process, which in turn can be used as a foundation for anticipatory planning rather than reactive planning to manage climate risks. Moreover, achieving successful action will probably need successful engagement of the communities that have been affected by the decision making process itself, and successful inclusion of those who are most affected by the climate change itself in the influence over decision making. Policies should be developed 'from above' to complement community based adaptation measures based on local knowledge and taking into account the needs of marginalised communities. Given a shared interest in climate information, there are opportunities for co-operation to develop water management and early warning systems that can mitigate tensions around water scarcity and enhance regional resilience. This is the only way Pakistan can curb the domino-effect of climate change and safeguard the values and assets of human dignity and national stability in the era of the rapid environmental changes.

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