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Troubled Waters

Will Rogers

The success of our military campaign in Afghanistan may rest squarely on what happens in Pakistan. And though it may not be the obvious lynchpin for America's military strategy in Afghanistan, turning the tide there may involve the nexus of natural resources and national security in Pakistan.

Climate change is having a devastating impact on the region's water security. Scientists project that by 2035 the Himalayan glaciers may completely disappear, taking away the water source that supports the Indus River and its tributaries, leaving millions of Pakistanis – already suffering from severe drought – parched.

Water has been an undergirding issue for Pakistan's long-term stability. Competition over already scarce water resources has factionalized the society. Severe droughts have incited riots in its major cities like Karachi, while drought-induced grain shortages have shaped election outcomes. With Pakistan hinging on the verge of further destabilization, an irreversible water crisis that threatens the livelihoods of millions of Pakistanis may be the last straw.

As climate change progresses, water will continue to exacerbate domestic grievances, making yesteryear's riots the good times compared to what may be coming down the pike. The U.S. military needs to be cognizant of the increasingly important role that natural resource consumption will have on U.S. national security, especially in this volatile region.

Pakistan's stability is a sine qua non for any successes we will achieve in Afghanistan. Since 2001, Pakistan has been an essential staging area for forces in Afghanistan. But with worsening violence and instability in the western provinces where supply convoys have been routinely attacked, the security situation has become fragile. The U.S. military needs a strong Pakistani government that can reign in the ungoverned spaces of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas and North West Frontier Province that border Afghanistan and serve as a sanctuary for Afghan militants and al Qaeda on the run from American and coalition forces.

But with water undermining Pakistan's stability, Afghan militants and al Qaeda could continue to thrive in the region. And as the water crisis worsens and stability becomes tenuous, the United States may find it increasingly difficult to enhance Islamabad's ability to put pressure on militants and al Qaeda along its western border.

Recognizing the importance of natural resources as part of a long-term security strategy is only the first step, however. The United States needs to actively engage on water and other natural resource issues to both bolster the security situation in the region while preventing the conditions that foment instability and violence.

American National Guard units deployed in Afghanistan are already engaging on natural resource challenges, helping build civilian capacity around agricultural development as part of a broader civilian assistance program that serves American interests by fostering economic opportunity and building goodwill with the Afghan population. For instance, hydrologists and other trained farmers from the agricultural development teams of the Kentuckian, Missourian and Nebraskan national guards are engaging local Afghans, sharing their expertise and teaching them to become self-sufficient.

Since 2004, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Gulf Region Division has been managing more than 500 capacity-building projects throughout Iraq focused on providing access to potable water by improving waste management facilities and building necessary infrastructure. These projects have improved the livelihoods of millions of Iraqis in some of the most drought-stricken parts of country, bringing a modicum of stability to still one of the most volatile countries in the world.

Executing similar programs through one of the myriad agencies within the U.S. national security apparatus that targets water security and governance in Pakistan could be adopted to serve America's near- and long-term interests.

Nevertheless, the United States should assist Islamabad in any way possible to build its capacity to provide Pakistanis sustainable access to water, especially in areas recently stabilized and cleared of Afghan militants and al Qaeda, helping to prevent a return to a deteriorated situation of want that breeds violent fundamentalism.

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