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EXPRESS OPINION

Nepal floods are a reminder: Don't forget the reality of geography

Rivers are central to South Asia's geographical imagination. They cannot just be seen as sources of water to be allocated, but they are also carriers of shared risks

The manner in which the disaster unfolded should shake the territorial imaginations that we often hold onto when we engage with our neighbourhood.

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GLOF — Glacial Lake Outburst Flood — is now a more familiar term. The fury of the floods in Nepal, with its shocking social-media visuals of a sheet of water reportedly close to seven metres high and carrying a terrifying mass of debris, has made GLOF almost a viral hashtag. Emerging evidence suggests it is not technically a GLOF, but an avalanche that turned into a cascading debris-flow hazard. Yet instead of repeating the clichéd clarion calls about nature taking notice of the Anthropocene, we may be better off paying attention to something more elementary — geography.

The spectacle calls for a kind of geographical revanchism, that is, a reassertion of South Asia as a geographical and ecological region, rather than merely a collection of disparate political territories. GLOFs know no borders. Our responses cannot be geography-blind.

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The manner in which the disaster unfolded should shake the territorial imaginations that we often hold onto when we engage with our neighbourhood. Rivers are central to South Asia's geographical imagination. They cannot just be seen as sources of water to be allocated; they are also carriers of shared risks. The origins of the GLOF in northern Nepal meant that it bore much of the immediate brunt. But India has little reason to be complacent.

India itself has experienced a series of similar incidents, with direct implications for its water-security interests. In 2014, a landslide over the same river, Bhote Koshi, led to the creation of a lake impounded by the landslide. India collaborated with Nepal to breach the lake in a controlled manner to reduce the downstream impact. In 2021, the Chamoli disaster, triggered by an avalanche and resulting in a massive flash flood, caused enormous losses, with impacts felt as far as Delhi – where its drinking

water supplies were disrupted. In 2023, the South Lhonak GLOF in Sikkim again demonstrated the speed and scale with which Himalayan hazards can have cascading impacts across settlements and critical infrastructure.

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We tend to underestimate the costs of these incidents, and do not account for how they can set infrastructure, livelihoods and development trajectories back by several steps. For a country pursuing the scale of transformation envisaged under the Viksit Bharat vision, repeated disruptions to critical infrastructure and water systems cannot be peripheral concerns.

India is not oblivious to these risks, though. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Water Resources, in its 2023 report on glacier management in the Himalayas, prominently discussed flash floods associated with glacial melting and the risks of glacial lake outbursts. Taking note of these emerging risks, the Committee made several recommendations on glacier management, including the need for systematic data gathering and monitoring of glaciers in the Indian Himalayan Region to develop actionable plans.

More importantly, the Committee recognised transboundary coordination as a core challenge, largely in terms of international cooperation. It pointed to the absence of a mechanism and the lack of provisions within existing treaties for dealing with glacier-linked risks. It urged the Ministry of Jal Shakti to take up the matter with the Ministry of External Affairs to have some kind of agreements with the neighbouring Himalayan countries for this purpose.

But this points to a larger issue. Rivers can no longer be peripheral to geopolitical conversations; they must be central to them. Further, water resources development can be territorial. Rivers cannot be. Geography determines river courses, and with them, the distribution of power and vulnerability. Risks can disrupt these conventionally understood power relations, if not flip them. The Himalayan reality and its emerging risks pose the bigger question: How do countries bound by geography jointly manage trans-territorial risks?

Nepal, India, Bangladesh and other neighbouring countries, including China, need to reconsider strategies and institutions that remain organised around political boundaries, even as the risks they must manage increasingly transcend them. When it comes to risk, an upstream riparian need not necessarily have complete advantage. Nepal’s disaster is a powerful reminder.

There is also a need to rethink water treaties from this new angle of coping with risks. Climate change is fundamentally altering the hydrological and ecological systems on which the treaty arrangements were based. The countries concerned should consider mechanisms that enable them to understand and manage the new risks.

The Himalayan cryosphere, combined with the geography of its river systems, calls for reimagining the region itself. Regional institutions may be imperfect, but the scale of the emerging risks makes it increasingly difficult to justify marginalising them. The region is interconnected by the ecologies, river systems, and climate dynamics, but the institutions through which the countries in the region engage with one another remain largely detached from these shared systems and risks.

There is an opportunity here for India to convene, to foster, to build practical institutions around shared risks. A Himalayan early-warning network, shared cryosphere-risk assessments, common protocols for GLOF and flash-flood alerts, and regular exercises involving disaster-management agencies could be the practical foundations for cooperation around shared risks.

The idea of imagining South Asia around shared environmental risks is not new. What is new is the urgency that GLOF-like risks bring. While the geography remains the same, the risks are changing.

The lesson is simple. GLOFs know no borders. Climate risks know no borders. Rivers know no borders. Our institutions, however, still largely do. Diplomacy cannot afford to be blind to the geography within which geopolitics operates.

The writer is President and Chief Executive, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi. Views are personal