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ASEAN: Act on Climate Change

Barry Desker

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The Kyoto approach of prescriptive binding obligations to reduce carbon emissions will be resisted in East Asia. At its November Summit, ASEAN should adopt an approach which emphasises changing the norms, exerting influence on major carbon emitters and obtaining consensual agreements. This could point the way forward for a deal at the UN meeting in Bali in December for a new framework agreement on climate change.

CLIMATE CHANGE is emerging as a critical issue on the security agenda of states within and outside Asia. Traditional security perspectives focused on the military and strategic dimensions. However, security in this day and age can no longer be confined to military issues alone nor can it be ensured only by focusing on military and strategic policies. With the end of the Cold War, security is much more broad-based covering non-military challenges such as economic degradation and resource scarcity, energy security, irregular migration, pandemics and transnational crimes that increasingly threaten the survival and well-being of states and societies. Climate change has not only become a topic of common interest at the regional and multilateral level but is also a key challenge in the spectrum of non-traditional security challenges.

Building a new consensus

When they met at the current UN General Assembly in September, world leaders agreed that climate change is now a global problem. This trend is demonstrated by the award of this year's Nobel Peace Prize to the former US Vice-President Al Gore and the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) "for their efforts to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about man-made climate change, and to lay the foundations for the measures that are needed to counteract such changes".

In December, UN members will meet in Bali to consider the post-Kyoto Protocol framework. It is now timely for ASEAN to act, especially as global warming threatens coastal communities in our region. The IPCC, composed of technical experts and established by the World Meteorological Organization and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), estimates that the populations in the Mekong and Chao Phraya deltas are at greatest risk while island communities are also at risk with the rising sea water levels. Deforestation threatens food gathering hill tribes in mainland Southeast Asia and has led to conflicts in Kalimantan.

The global consensus on the grave non-traditional security challenges posed by climate change, however, is not matched by a consensus on how best to address this problem. The differing political responses and contentious negotiations taking place in the international community has been aptly described by US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice. She observed that the "one-size-fits-all

approach would not work....there must be room for each nation to tackle the problem through medium-term programmes that reflected its own needs and did not require it to put aside economic growth for the sake of the environmental health". Although there is agreement on the need for a new global framework to observe the key principles put forward by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), to be adopted at the Bali meeting, particularly on the reduction of carbon emissions, the divergence of views between the developed and the developing countries on how to proceed remains a serious obstacle in mitigating the impact of climate change.

Need for Asian Action

There is now a widespread appreciation of the severe consequences that climate change poses to the overall security of mankind (especially the developing world), and the need to prevent the negative effects of climate change. In a recent report by the CNA Corporation entitled "National Security and the Threat of Climate Change", retired US military generals noted that climate change serves as "a threat multiplier for instability in some of the most volatile regions in the world". It is imperative that Asian states address climate change because not only does it threaten their environmental security but it would also have repercussions on their energy, economic, health and social security.

Concrete Asian action on climate change is also essential as the region contributes a substantial amount of carbon emissions that precipitate climate change. According to the US Department of Energy's Earth Policy Institute, China, India and South Korea rank amongst the top ten countries for carbon emissions due to the burning of fossil fuels. However, Wetlands International suggests that if carbon emissions from human activities, such as the burning of peat land to clear land for plantation development are included, Indonesia with an average of 2 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide emitted each year would be the 3rd biggest emitter of greenhouse gases in the world after the US and China.

The annual haze alerts in Malaysia and Singapore over the past decade are a reminder that the burning of peat land and forests is an issue that concerns all of us. It is often claimed that such burning is the work of shifting cultivators. However, the correlation between 'hot spots' on satellite imagery and the expansion of palm oil plantations and other renewable crops indicates that major commercial enterprises, not marginalised peasants, are the cause of these fires. The problem will increase in the next decade as the building of bio-fuel plants will increase the demand for palm oil and other renewable crops. Indicative of this trend is the building of some of the world's largest bio-diesel plants in Sumatra (Indonesia).

However, this development highlights the contradictory consequences of well-meaning actions. The increased use of bio-fuels arises from initiatives to promote its use. Under the provisions of the Kyoto Protocol, 38 industrialised countries committed to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases in 2008-2012 to levels that are 5.2% below the 1990 level. These countries have encouraged the use of fuel sources that emit fewer greenhouse gases. The EU Commission's action plan, for example, lays down a minimum target for the replacement of fossil fuels by bio-fuels in all EU member states. This has led to an increased demand for bio-diesel and the clearance of peat land and forests in Indonesia.

ASEAN: Beyond the Kyoto model

These developments form the backdrop for the initiatives that are coming out from Asia on the climate change issue. Singapore will host the 13th ASEAN Summit, the ASEAN plus Three meeting, as well as the 3rd East Asian Summit from 18-21 November. The key theme of the summits and related meetings will be on "Energy, Environment, Climate Change and Sustainable Development". In line with this theme, ASEAN hopes to sign the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Environmental Sustainability at the ASEAN Summit. ASEAN is also proposing a Singapore Declaration on the Environment at the East Asian Summit. The ASEAN-EU Summit will also have climate change high up on the agenda.

The Kyoto approach of prescriptive binding obligations will be resisted in East Asia. An approach which emphasises changing the norms, exerting influence on major carbon emitters and obtaining consensual agreements is much more likely to succeed. ASEAN should adopt this approach. It is also critical that measures be adopted that would not lead to environmental disasters in other areas as a consequence of the new policy orientation. It would mark a shift away from the Kyoto model and would bring on board China, Indonesia and the United States in the agreement to be concluded at the UNFCCC meeting in Bali.

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