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EAS and Non-Traditional Security: How about Health and Food Concerns?

By Ong Suan Ee

Synopsis

The East Asia Summit has been a forum for various non-traditional security issues spanning energy security to disaster management. It is time to broaden the scope to include the crucial issues of health beyond pandemics and food security.

Commentary

NON-TRADITIONAL security (NTS) issues have ranked high on the East Asia Summit's (EAS) agenda since its establishment in 2005. Calls for greater collaboration on key NTS issues such as energy security, climate change, disaster management, and infectious diseases have featured prominently at past summits. However, there is a notable absence of EAS discussion on two areas -- health security issues beyond the scope of infectious diseases, and food security.

EAS and Health Security

Pandemic influenza was identified as the EAS' primary health priority during its inception in 2005. This is unsurprising given that numerous infectious diseases, including dengue and malaria, are endemic across many member states. Additionally, the damaging socioeconomic consequences of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 and avian influenza (H5N1) in 2005 resulted in heightened awareness of threats from infectious diseases among EAS member states.

This awareness helped cement the sustained political support that has propelled the EAS' pandemic preparedness and response agenda. In recent Summits, the EAS focussed on pandemics and related challenges including regional stockpiling and access to affordable medicines and vaccines, particularly H1N1.

The 2009 EAS Chairman's Statement describes H1N1 as both a "challenge to economic growth" and a threat to the "well-being of peoples". This suggests that the international health problems prioritised by the EAS are also those most potentially disruptive to economic development. If this is indeed the case, it would be wise for the EAS to take heed of the global non-communicable disease (NCD) burden -- an issue that has gained significant momentum this past year.

The United Nations has played an integral role in raising the profile of NCDs in 2011. Of special relevance is the UN High-Level Meeting on Non-Communicable Diseases. NCDs are only the second health issue to be the subject of a high-level meeting attended by heads of state and government -- the last was HIV/AIDS a decade

ago. Incidentally, both have been described by the UN as “emerging health issue(s) with a major socio-economic impact”.

This flurry of large-scale activity appears justifiable by sheer numbers alone: a recent report by the UN Secretary-General noted that 36 million people die annually from NCDs, amounting to 63 per cent of global deaths. Of those, nine million are under 60 years of age, adversely affecting the number of able, contributing participants to the global workforce. Also, 90 per cent of those deaths occur in developing countries, resulting in tremendous socio-economic opportunity costs for emerging and transitional economies worldwide.

The rise of NCDs also entails serious health consequences for member states, placing additional burdens upon states' health facilities, healthcare systems and often already-stretched medical workforces. This is of particular concern for Southeast Asian members of the EAS.

According to Asian Trends Monitoring, most Southeast Asian countries' health systems are built to manage endemic infectious diseases, not chronic NCDs. Further, they argue that NCD responses across these countries are neither well-coordinated nor well-funded. Also, continued challenges to policy implementation – such as the increase of NCDs among the urban poor -- remain largely unaddressed. Will the NCD issue make its debut at this month's EAS in Bali?

EAS and Food Security

Since the global food price crisis of 2007-2008, food security has occupied a firm spot on the international stage. This has not escaped the EAS, with food security cited as a serious concern at EAS Foreign Ministers' Informal Consultations, notably in 2008 and 2011. However, food security appears to be given less importance than other NTS issues considered critical by the EAS.

During the 2008 Informal Consultation, food security was primarily addressed in relation to its overlap with the energy sector and the need to balance the dual priorities of using agricultural crops for food and biofuel production. Similarly, the 2011 Informal Consultation in Bali saw the foreign ministers emphasise greater regional cooperation on food and energy security, recognise the synergetic relationship between food and energy security and encourage balanced, sustainable growth across both areas.

It is evident that the EAS is mindful of the far-reaching, multi-sectoral impact of the challenges of food security upon all member states. Therefore the absence of food security from the agenda of the Summits themselves is all the more puzzling.

For example, the 2009 EAS Chairman's Statement made no mention of food security, despite the protracted effects of the global food price crisis. In the 2010 EAS Chairman's Statement, food security was not identified as one of the EAS' five priority areas, namely finance, education, energy, disaster management and influenza preparedness. It only received brief mention, and even so in the context of reaffirming commitments to further disaster management cooperation.

In arguing whether or not food security should be tabled as a stand-alone concern in the forthcoming EAS in Bali, we need look no further than the recently-released Global Hunger Index 2011. Evidence of the pervasiveness of food security challenges within the EAS is clear: two out of the 18-member coalition of EAS member states -- Laos and India -- were found to have 'alarming' rates of hunger, while five others (Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar) recorded 'serious' levels of hunger severity.

The uncertainty of the global food trade system also provides a compelling reason for the EAS to highlight food security on its agenda. The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2011 report cautioned that food price volatility and high prices are likely to continue and possibly increase in the near future, making farmers, consumers and countries more vulnerable to poverty and food insecurity. This trend has wider implications for all EAS member states, from major food-producing countries like United States, India and China to small, import-dependent states like Singapore.

Moving Forward

The absence of the emergent and pressing global issues of health security beyond infectious diseases and food security beyond the scope of energy concerns impedes the EAS' primary goal. That is to promote member states' collaboration, exchange and cooperation on key regional and global political and economic issues. It would certainly be in the EAS' interest to consider the broader scope of health security and introduce food security in the EAS Summit in Bali.

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