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Energy, Climate Change and Sustainable Development: Are Regional Security Frameworks Prepared?

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Amid the mixed emotions threatening to dampen the celebratory mood of the 40th Anniversary of ASEAN and its series of related summits, there are important questions about their respective agendas. There is a need to focus attention on the kinds of issues and initiatives that will emerge in response to the pressing security challenges confronting the region today.

ASEAN's 13th Summit in Singapore this week is being met with mixed responses from analysts and observers of the regional grouping. On the one hand, there is rising expectation about the much-talked about ASEAN Charter that would effectively usher in a new phase of regionalism in Southeast Asia. On the other, recent events in Myanmar (or Burma) appear to cast a shadow on ASEAN's credibility in the eyes of the international community.

The momentum that has been building up in the run-up to the ASEAN Summit also seems to have reached an anti-climax with the 'leaking' of copies of the purported draft of the Charter that is due to be signed by ASEAN leaders. Already some quarters have expressed disappointment and dismay over what they consider as a 'watered-down' version of what could have been a promising Charter. There is certainly a watering down from the recommendations of the Eminent Persons Group who were assigned to offer their ideas on the Charter, after conducting a series of consultations with civil society groups and business organisations in the region.

But amid the mixed emotions threatening to dampen the celebratory mood of the 40th Anniversary of ASEAN, there are equally pressing questions about the agendas of this 13th ASEAN Summit and the series of related gathering of leaders -- the 11th ASEAN Plus Three (APT) Summit, the 3rd East Asian Summit (EAS) and the flurry of ministerial meetings. There is a need to focus on what specific issues and initiatives these regional security frameworks have identified to respond to a number of pressing security challenges confronting the region today.

Re-calibrating the Regional Security Agenda

Interestingly, among the key issues are those on energy, environment, climate change and sustainable development. An important document is the proposed *ASEAN Declaration on Environmental Sustainability*. Similarly at the 3rd EAS, a *Singapore Declaration on the Environment* will be key. To be sure, these declarations are clearly reflective of the kinds of challenges that are high on the security agenda of states in the region. There are obviously many more issues that can be added to the list of security challenges facing ASEAN and the wider East Asia. The salient question is whether these regional security frameworks are adequate to respond to the host of security threats that have emerged on the horizon.

Energy Security

The issue of energy security is not new, although this has now gained more currency. Much of the security forecasting in the region has for some time now identified energy security as the key security risk of Asia. So far, much of the framing of the risks of energy security had focused on security of supply, security of access to resources and sustainable pricing.

Yet, ASEAN has not had a clear policy on energy until very recently. The ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation (2004-2009) outlined, among others, plans to establish interconnecting agreements in the field of energy through the ASEAN Power Grid and Trans-ASEAN Gas Pipeline. This, and the development of new and renewable energy resources notwithstanding, not much has been heard of about the progress of these plans, except for the information that has been available by the ASEAN Secretariat. It may therefore be timely to examine the problems that have held up the implementations of these projects.

Aside from ideas about having a regional power grid and gas pipeline, several issues need to be further explored. Based on the experience of the EU, these issues would include the possibility of stockpiling energy reserves, investments in infrastructures, sharing of technology, particularly in areas of energy efficiency and conservation. Given the enormous task of dealing with energy security, inter-ASEAN cooperation needs to be synergised with the other regional frameworks that deal with this issue, be it at the ASEAN Plus Three or the East Asian level.

Climate Change

Climate change is now emerging as a major security issue. Note for instance that climate change featured in the agenda of the 2nd East Asian Summit in January 2007. There is now a flood of information from scientific studies like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change on the security implications of climate change on state and human security. Despite this, and the resulting publicity, there has yet to be a regional strategy to deal with the number of cross-cutting security risks from climate change — be it at the ASEAN or the wider East Asian region.

This year's ASEAN and East Asian Summits are therefore highly important given that climate change is now included in the agenda. Nevertheless, while discussions on this issue are still very much at an early stage, the grave security implications of the effects of climate change should propel ASEAN and the EAS to craft more defined strategies in mitigating the multiple risks and threats emerging. These include the greater frequency of floods and storms, and higher incidence of natural disasters around Southeast Asia and the wider region.

Environmental Protection and Security frameworks

The strategies to mitigate the harmful effects of climate change, as well as to address the challenges of energy security, must take into account their impact on the environment. This triangular relationship obviously complicates decisions on how the respective issues are to be efficiently tackled and how regional cooperation can proceed. More importantly, crafting regional responses would also need to consider the larger political, economic and social conditions of the states and societies in the region. This is obviously no mean task to handle for any regional framework -- be it ASEAN, APT nor EAS. This is where sustainable development as a possible framework for intra and inter-regional cooperation can be useful.

The bringing together of 'Energy, Environment, Climate Change and Sustainable Development' as one broad yet inter-related theme in this year's ASEAN and EAS Summits is therefore a positive development, which reflects the multi-sectoral impact of these issues. Despite the potential disagreements that could emerge in mapping out regional responses, the shared vulnerabilities of the

regional states should be enough impetus for the regional leaders, as well the relevant state and non-state actors, to navigate through contentious waters to urgently address these security threats.

As with many non-traditional threats which are transboundary, regional multilateral approaches are no doubt critical given the limited resources of individual states. This is why despite their weaknesses and limitations, it is still worth pinning our hopes on the strengthening of regional frameworks to help ensure the security of states and societies in the region.

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