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Climate Change: ASEAN Plus 3's New Concern

*Chen Gang and Li Mingjiang**

8 August 2007

AMIDST INCREASING global attention on climate change, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has vowed in the joint communiqué of its 40th Ministerial Meeting to make concerted efforts to tackle this problem. Meanwhile, the coming ASEAN Summit to be held in Singapore in November 2007 is expected to discuss a declaration to address climate change and global warming.

The issue of climate change, therefore, will be an important topic on the agenda of the ASEAN Summit for the first time, and is also expected to be on the radar screen of the ASEAN plus Three Summit, which includes China, Japan and the Republic of Korea, in the near future. Echoing the concern that has been raised at this year's G-8 summit, this new ASEAN initiative came at a right time because regional states do need to act now to coordinate their positions on the upcoming international negotiations for a post-Kyoto regime.

Southeast Asia's Vulnerability to Climate Change

Although global warming is affecting the ecological system of the whole world and poses a threat to all countries, some regions and countries are especially vulnerable to this alarming rise of temperature due to their special geographic features and weak adaptation capacities. Many Southeast Asian countries are located in tropical areas and some of them are littoral, archipelagic or island states with long coastlines. One of the projected impacts of climate change is sea-level rise, which will bring about saltwater intrusion into surface and ground water of the coastal areas, reduce output of the fishery industry, and destroy mangroves and the habitats of various benthic organisms due to changes in salinity. Global warming also increases the frequency and intensity of tropical storms, and induces more cardiovascular and respiratory diseases. Some parts of Southeast Asia are already experiencing increasing cases of tropical diseases such as dengue fever and malaria because warmer temperature nurtures the insect population and is more suitable for vector-borne diseases.

Take the Philippines and Indonesia as examples. These two archipelagic states are believed to be extremely vulnerable to climate change. Indonesia, consisting of about 17,000 islands, may witness 2,000 of them submerged by 2030 due to sea-level rise if the current trend of global warming continues unchecked. The Philippines, with approximately 7,100 islands and rocks, is suffering from more tropical cyclones and flooding that damage the country's agriculture and infrastructure. With frequent precipitations caused by climate change, agricultural outputs could be significantly reduced. The Philippines and Indonesia thus have had greater interests to take an active part in the international climate change negotiations since late 1980s. The Philippines was one of the first countries to discuss and develop positions on climate change, and it was involved in the setting up of the

Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC). The Philippines was also among the first countries to set up a national committee to negotiate at the Conferences of Parties of the FCCC.

Preparing for the Next Round of International Talks

The 1997 Kyoto Protocol only sets mandatory emission cuttings on an average level of about 5% upon industrialized countries during 2008-2012. This has been widely criticized for not being able to produce satisfactory results. The next round of international negotiations for a post-Kyoto pact will soon start at the UN's World Climate Change Conference in Bali, Indonesia at the end of 2007. At that time, this island in Southeast Asia will take the international limelight, attracting over 10,000 conference participants from around the world, including a number of heads of states.

Past experience has shown that such international climate talks involving more than 100 countries was time-consuming with sharp divergences among different countries and blocs. A single country has to form a bloc with other countries of similar stances to magnify its say on such a disputed issue. So, pre-negotiation policy coordination inside various blocs becomes extremely important for their future successful pursuit of interests in the global talks.

During the previous climate talks on the Kyoto Protocol, ASEAN countries aligned themselves with other developing nations and formed the "Group of 77 and China" bloc. Together, they negotiated with industrialized countries and insisted on "common but differentiated responsibilities". Due to their vulnerable geographic locations, some Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia became strong pushing forces in the global climate negotiations. This time, the 10-member ASEAN welcomed the proposal of Singapore, the current chair of the regional grouping, to make "Energy, Environment, Climate Change and Sustainable Development" the theme for discussions at the 13th ASEAN Summit and Related Summits in November. This is partly because the organization finds it necessary to coordinate the stances and policies of its member states on the climate change issue before the Bali conference. As ASEAN member states differ in their levels of economic development, environmental protection and geographic characteristics, policy coordination becomes highly necessary for the preparation of the new round of talks. Choosing Bali as the venue of the World Climate Change Conference indicates ASEAN's desire to may play a special and independent role in the post-Kyoto talks.

A New Area of Collaboration for ASEAN Plus Three?

It is important for ASEAN to collaborate more closely with its three Northeast Asian partners -- China, Japan, and South Korea -- on the issue of climate change. China, the world's second largest greenhouse gas emitter, is facing increasing international pressure for more emission cutting. Suffering from mounting domestic pollution problems, China is seeking international aid, especially through bilateral cooperation, to balance its economic development and environmental protection. It needs international support and understanding from other blocs to forestall any legally-binding emission cutting obligations. Japan, the birth place of the Kyoto Protocol, has special interest in climate change talks because it always regards environmental protection causes as an efficient means to promote its international image. Meanwhile Japan also finds it difficult to fulfill its obligations in the Kyoto Protocol to cut emissions by 6% before 2012.

Expansion of global carbon trading and more environmental investment into developing countries serve the interest of Japan, which urgently needs policy coordination and support from ASEAN. South Korea, which has been exempted from mandatory emission cuttings in the Kyoto Protocol, may also be pressured to shoulder more stringent obligations in the next climate treaty due to its high level of industrialization. Seoul already actively participated in the Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate. Equipped with high-end technology, it certainly wants to expand regional

cooperation in energy conservation and fuel switching.

It is timely and of strategic importance, therefore, for ASEAN to not only devote more attention to the climate change issue but also expand its bloc politics to include China, Japan, and South Korea.

* *Chen Gang is Visiting Research Fellow at the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore. Li Mingjiang is an Assistant Professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University.*