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GLOBAL RECESSION, GLOBAL WARMING: Will Climate Change Negotiations Slow Down?

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The global economic recession is likely to negatively affect global negotiations on climate change as governments worry more about their economies and cutting the cost of doing business than about the effects of rising temperatures or sea levels.

GLOBAL WARMING and its impact on climate change are attracting increasing attention today. Regardless of whether John McCain or Barack Obama wins the United States presidency on 4 November, US policy on this issue is set to change. The next US president will be much more favourable towards mandatory cap and trade systems to reduce greenhouse gas emissions induced by man-made activities. However, the current global financial and economic meltdown is likely to slow progress towards international consensus on effective climate change agreements at the international level. Governments will be reluctant to increase business costs in the face of a weakening economy. Global negotiations on climate change run the risk of becoming bogged down, just like the Doha Round of trade negotiations at the World Trade Organisation.

More than just environmental damage

Today, there is growing recognition within the international community that global warming and climate change is more than just a matter of environmental degradation and physical consequences. It is now seen as a serious long-term challenge that threatens the security of states and their citizens. Attention is focused on three aspects.

First, climate change has the potential to generate more humanitarian crises. Climate change could induce a greater frequency and intensity of natural disasters such as flooding and cyclones. These extreme weather events can result in great loss of human lives, poverty and misery for affected communities, as we have seen recently in Myanmar which was devastated by Cyclone Nargis. This could lead to refugee migrations that may destabilize the affected area and its surrounding neighbours.

Secondly, climate change could have a negative impact on agricultural production and the supply of

fresh water and arable land. When that happens, competition for resources may provoke civil strife and conflicts. The violence in Darfur, for example, has its roots in ethnic conflict. But it has also been linked to land resource problems caused by desertification and competition for arable land. While climate change is unlikely to be the primary driving force behind any specific conflict, it could be the trigger for conflict.

Thirdly, there is a growing nexus between climate change and the emergence and spread of diseases. The rise in global average temperatures has been identified as one of the primary reasons extending the ranges and seasons of various tropical disease-carriers, pushing the geographical boundaries of these diseases into areas previously too cold for such diseases to survive. The West Nile virus, for example, had never been detected in North America until some eight years ago. Meanwhile, dengue fever and the Lyme disease are heading northwards while malaria is occurring at much higher elevations than ever recorded before. This is particularly worrisome in an increasingly interconnected world where pandemics and their impact spread around the globe faster than ever.

Impact on Singapore

Climate change will adversely affect Singapore and the region. The Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) assessed that low-lying coastal areas of South, Southeast and East Asia would be increasingly susceptible to flooding because of global warming. The Chao Phraya and Mekong deltas are particularly at risk. Significant increases in rainfall and stronger tropical cyclones are expected in the region. With a conservative estimate of a 40 cm rise in sea levels by 2100, the annual number of people in the region affected by flooding would increase from 13 million to 94 million. In this context, the Singapore scholar on the IPCC, Wong Poh Poh, has highlighted the significant risk of flooding on Singapore's east coast.

These factors have led to the growing recognition amongst leaders and decision makers that climate change is a non-traditional security issue. In April 2007, the UN Security Council addressed the question of climate change for the first time, warning about its potential to be a "conflict catalyst". In the US, the recent National Intelligence Assessment made it clear that "climate change will have sweeping consequences for US national security". In 2012, the Kyoto Protocol runs out, with most of the major developed countries who have committed to cuts in emissions performing well below their commitments. In December 2009, Denmark will host a meeting of the parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) which it hopes will result in the Copenhagen Protocol.

Danger of short-termism

The problem is that short-term considerations are likely to cloud long-term thinking. In the US, both presidential candidates support oil drilling in ecologically-sensitive areas in a quest for energy independence amidst high oil prices. In Southeast Asia, export opportunities have led to an enthusiastic response to the conversion of palm oil to biofuels. But the expansion of oil palm acreage particularly in Indonesia leads to the cutting-down of primary forests and the burning of non-commercially viable vegetation. This largely accounts for the annual haze problem in Malaysia and Singapore. In parts of Riau and Jambi, visibility is reduced to less than 100 metres at the height of the burning season.

Economic development agencies in the region have given tax and other incentives to investments in biofuel manufacturing facilities. There is little awareness that governments need to be concerned about the impact of such biofuel facilities in promoting the cutting down and burning of primary forests, not just in Southeast Asia but also in ecologically fragile environments such as the Congo and Amazon basins.

Financial crisis and the eroding will to act

A more immediate issue now looms large. The sharp global economic downturn arising from the US financial crisis could undermine the political will to tackle climate change. At the EU summit earlier in October, Italy and Germany led the way in questioning the feasibility of carbon-cutting targets. There were fears that tough policies would lead to the loss of jobs as industries generating greenhouse gases such as steel manufacturers would migrate.

One difference in Copenhagen compared to Kyoto is that developing countries will be much more engaged in the negotiations. This development will make it more difficult for agreements to be reached. The costs of immediate action on global warming amidst a global economic recession will be on the minds of developing country negotiators. They will be concerned with the risks to their economies as the financial crisis spills over into Brazil, South Korea and Pakistan, oil exporters suffer from sharply declining oil prices and the Chinese and Indian economies slow. They are likely to resist pressures by the EU and Japan for China, India and other developing countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as well as efforts by the developed countries to differentiate between developing countries during the negotiations.

The scene is therefore set for difficult negotiations in Copenhagen. In a world facing its worst recession in a century, the immediate need to promote economic recovery is likely to take precedence over the longer term benefits of reducing man-made carbon emissions.

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