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Water Insecurity in Himalayas: Emerging Tensions & Lessons for ASEAN

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

Climate Change is triggering water insecurity in the Greater Himalayan region, raising new sources of tension that may embroil India and China in future conflict. These emerging tensions need to be managed. There are also lessons for ASEAN.

Commentary

GLOBAL WARMING is melting glaciers in the Himalayan mountains -- the "Water Tower of Asia". The region is the common source of major rivers that flow into at least four countries -- China, India, Nepal and Bangladesh. Climate change is also causing drought and disruption to the flows of these rivers, leading to the displacement of people downstream and triggering migration from Bangladesh into India. Indeed, India has even built a border fence to stem the flow of the "climate refugees". The resulting water insecurity is a potential source of tension affecting all the four countries. But the most worrying is the potential conflict between the Asian giants -- China and India -- beset as they already are by historical tensions.

Concerned by the long-term ramifications of rising water insecurity, diplomats in their private capacities as well academics, analysts and journalists from the four countries met in Singapore on 2-3 December 2010 to brainstorm possible cooperation amongst the four nations referred to as the "Himalayan River Basin Countries". Hosted by the Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), the meeting was organised by the Strategic Foresight Group, a think-tank based in India with a global reach. The SFG recently put up a report entitled the "Himalayan Challenge: Water Insecurity in Emerging Asia" which formed the backdrop of the Singapore meeting. The guest of honour of the workshop was Mr Tan Gee Paw, Chairman of the Public Utilities Board, Singapore's water agency.

Water Insecurity

The SFG paper asserts that in the next 30-40 years, water will be one of the key drivers of the Asian political and security agenda. The prospects for economic growth in Asia, already much influenced by security trends in East Asia, will depend on geopolitical stability in the Himalayan sub-region as well. This is due to the positions of China and India as rising economic giants with a huge appetite for economic resources as well as water. Growing populations in both countries will add further pressures for more clean water, which is depleting due to climate change. Compounding the water woes caused by global warming are contributing factors such as pollution and industrialisation.

China reportedly plans to divert the upper section of the Brahmaputra, known as Yarlong Tsangpo in Tibet, to overcome its water shortage in Western China. This move has caused anxieties in India, Nepal and Bangladesh. China has denied such reports when India took the matter up at the highest level. Workshop participants agreed that the need for cooperation is urgent, especially given the strategic implications in economic, water, environmental, health, food and security terms.

The paper was in part triggered by a conference in Mumbai in 2008 which assigned the SFG to address the issue of water security in view of the melting glaciers and the flow of the Himalayan-originating rivers, namely the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers into China, and Brahmaputra and Ganges into India and Bangladesh. Another major river that draws its source from the Himalayas is the Mekong, Southeast Asia's longest river which flows into China's Yunnan province and five ASEAN countries – Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

Lessons for Southeast Asia

Water insecurity in the Himalayan River Basin therefore has clear but under-studied implications for mainland Southeast Asia, especially in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) which includes five ASEAN states and China. Vietnam has complained about China's dams on the Mekong which it says interrupted the flow of water into southern Vietnam. Yet, analysts note Vietnam too has caused anxieties in neighbouring Cambodia when Hanoi built a large dam in 2003 without consulting Phnom Penh, as required of members of the Mekong River Commission.

There are obvious lessons for Southeast Asia from the Himalayan sub-region experience.

The first lesson is that water is a trans-boundary issue – a point emphasised by the participants of the Singapore meeting. This makes the need to cooperate compelling. Secondly, cooperation is not easy to forge without political will and mutual trust. This was a point equally emphasised during the discussion -- reflecting the divisive undercurrents that have generally bedeviled relations in South Asia, including the Himalayan River Basin sub-region.

Both issues – the trans-boundary nature of water insecurity and the need for political will and mutual trust – are equally critical for Southeast Asia. The difference is that the Southeast Asian region, since its integration into a single bloc as ASEAN, has gradually overcome the trust deficit. Indeed, there are three ways in which ASEAN has addressed intractable issues, according to Mely Anthony, head of the NTS Centre which hosted the meeting.

The first is through summitry. ASEAN leaders have learned that they could overcome inertia, resistance and roadblocks at the level of their bureaucracies by setting the tone from the top through their summits. By meeting regularly, leaders of the ASEAN core – Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines and Thailand – have over time dramatically reduced the historical mistrust amongst themselves. As the ASEAN experience becomes less conflictual, leaders pushed for accelerated economic development, which in turn engenders greater mutual trust.

Managing Water Insecurity

Today, after four decades of existence as a regional bloc, ASEAN has shifted into higher gear: it has transformed itself into a more structured group, with legally-binding rules and even addressing sensitive issues that were previously skirted around, such as human rights.

The problem of water insecurity in Southeast Asia, as in the Himalayan region, is not yet critical at this stage – but is certainly emerging. Of the five ASEAN members that are depending on the Mekong for livelihood, four – Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam -- are relatively new to the ASEAN approach to resolving disputes.

But the ASEAN structure and culture of working together as a family – the ASEAN Way – will be severely tested should tensions from water insecurity in mainland Southeast Asia spill over. The ASEAN Way will be a useful umbrella to manage a water crisis. It may even be relevant for the Himalayan River Basin sub-region in its quest for managing the emerging water insecurity.

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