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Climate Change: Just As Dangerous for Southeast Asia

By Le Dinh Tinh

Synopsis

Climate change as a topic of security has been under-discussed. While research has been made and action taken, a policy deficit would pose a real threat to Southeast Asia.

Commentary

THE BIG question facing Southeast Asia's policymakers today is not making a choice between butter and guns but how to face the growing threats from other various sources, including climate change. Given the chronic scarcity of resources, can countries in Southeast Asia cope with the long-term impact of climate change not just on their economies but also on their citizens and their livelihoods?

Imagine that climate change is reducing the world's GDP by 1.6 percent, which is about US\$1.2 trillion. This is like the Republic of Korea's economy being wiped out from the world economic map.

A new debate

Let's take another specific example. The Mekong Delta helps Vietnam become a big exporter of rice to the world. Vietnam is a major contributor to the world's food security. Local scientists, however, predict that if Vietnam cannot stop climate change and its impact at the current level, which is among the worst in the world, Vietnam will have to import rice five times larger in volume than its export today. In addition, sea-level rise, coupled with river-level drop, is salinating vast areas of the Delta, potentially affecting the livelihoods of millions of people.

From land to the oceans, climate change is having a major impact. It is thought to change the natural formation of the islands and affecting the resources in the South China Sea on which different claims have been made.

Equally alarming, climate change may increase the likelihood of the resort to violence. Under the stress of climate change, competition for natural resources might well lead to conflicts between nations, as forecast by experts. For instance, lack of access to water due to low availability and human factors might threaten to increase tensions and undermine the hard-won peace and stability of Southeast Asia. It is therefore sensible to state that the bigger question for every regional government and various organisations today is the strategic one.

Far-reaching repercussions

The repercussions of climate change have transcended economics and traditional security. It now has to do with the well-being of hundreds of millions of people. For example, Southeast Asia is classified as an area that is being or about to be a “seriously affected” area by climate change, according to a report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

This is because a vast part of its population lives on agriculture and natural resources both of which depend on stability in the global climate. It thus makes sense for policymakers to reflect on the issue with a wider and deeper lens. Most of the economies in Southeast Asia are still developing. The World Bank estimates that more than 35 percent of Southeast Asians live in “direst poverty”. This group of people is located in rural areas where the adaptive capacity for climate change is “very limited”.

The rest of the population is not free from the adverse impact of climate change. Sea-level rise, droughts, floods are recurring themes in this part of the world. The flood in Bangkok in 2011 was estimated to cost Thailand US\$17 billion and economists say it would take much more than that for recovery.

Some scholars also look at the cultural factor. The land and water that people have lived on for generations will not stay the same because of changes in the climate. Traditional ways of living have to be adapted to the new context. With their traditional cultures affected, can people remain as they are?

At the same time, threats from traditional security challenges such as conflicts and wars in Southeast Asia remain, even though the region has generally been stable and peaceful. There is no doubt that because of the security dilemma, no country can consider itself safe.

That means, traditional security enhancement is a top priority for any country in this anarchic world, not just Southeast Asia. The problem is how much should a country spend for this. Also, how should it balance its limited resources with the need to meet non-traditional security challenges such as mitigating climate change.

Current options

According to *The Economist and IHS Jane's*, Southeast Asian countries increased defence spending by 13.5% in 2011, to US\$24.5 billion. This is larger than the GDP size of some Southeast Asian countries combined. Policymakers are not simply working with numbers; there are dealing with people.

Can anyone convince governments that non-traditional security challenges are threatening people no less than those afflicted by traditional security threats, and that we have to reallocate resources accordingly? Policy legacies are not melting down at the speed of ice in the Arctic. Quite the contrary, the traditional security industry still has a big say in the policymaking of many countries.

The remaining part of the question – how - is equally gloomy. Capacity is at a chokepoint for most of the Southeast Asian governments. How can they restructure their economies to become low-carbon or green economies? Where would they get the technologies?

Myriad questions remain in the fight against climate change alone in Southeast Asia. Awareness has been raised, but is it enough? When a soldier is holding a weapon, he is supposed to point it at a specific target. But now with his “enemy” being threats from everywhere, where can he point?

Against this background, many are hoping for a Southeast Asia that rebalances its resources and does the right thing. ASEAN is taking steps in addressing climate change, for example via the mechanisms under the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. Given the magnitude of the issue, it may be just as well that it is also being considered under the ambit of the ASEAN Political-Security Community.

Le Dinh Tinh is Deputy Director General, Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam. He contributed this personal comment specially to RSIS Commentaries.