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The Haze and ASEAN: Environmental Politics, Diplomacy and Stability

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

The haze problem that was threatening to worsen into a new regional crisis appears to have been somewhat defused for now. If diplomacy fails to overcome environmental politics in the longer run, will the region lose faith in its largest member Indonesia?

Commentary

IF PRESIDENT Yudhoyono's unilateral apology to Singapore and Malaysia over the haze last week came as a surprise, the domestic criticisms he provoked for doing so were equally unexpected. It was threatening to become yet another regional crisis. Fortunately for ASEAN, the regional foreign ministers meeting that was coming up in Brunei around the same time saw environmental politics shifting quickly to become environmental diplomacy.

The upshot: an agreement on how to prevent the haze problem from recurring - plus a big hint to Indonesia to start ratifying a 2002 regional haze agreement it had signed but not ratified for far too long. For the cynics of ASEAN, the Brunei solution over the weekend may not be good enough. But the haze problem has sharpened the awareness of how environmental issues can easily trigger tensions in a region already saddled with many other challenges. The disputes the haze has caused between Indonesia and its neighbours have, however, quickened the mainstreaming in ASEAN of what is broadly known as non-traditional security - of which the haze problem is a growing part.

How haze problem got big

It all began around 20 June 2013 when the Singapore skies were enveloped with thick smoke caused by forest fires in Riau, Sumatra. It quickly became the worst smog since 1997, reaching at one point a hazardous level of 401 on the Pollutant Standards Index. While Singapore scrambled into defensive mode, not much troubleshooting was sensed on the Indonesian side. Indeed, the Riau province was in the news at the time for the wrong reason - its governor was detained for corruption, partly linked to alleged abuse of deforestation permits.

As Singapore's protestations grew in intensity, undiplomatic slurs surfaced in Jakarta amid a blame-game between Indonesian officials and foreign companies allegedly linked to the forest fires, some with Singaporean and Malaysian links. The peak of the environmental politics came when Singapore's complaints were dismissed

by Coordinating Minister Agung Laksono as “childish”. That shocking outburst turned the haze into an unwelcome test of bilateral and regional ties.

Singapore leaders refused to be drawn into what Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong called “megaphone diplomacy”. Instead they focused on getting Indonesia to tackle the haze problem at its root. PM Lee despatched his environment minister Vivian Balakrishnan as his special envoy bearing a personal letter to President Yudhoyono, to be followed by emergency ministerial talks. As this was happening, Malaysia lobbied for an urgent ASEAN meeting in Kuala Lumpur, which it fast-tracked from August to July. It too sent a minister and a letter of concern from Prime Minister Najib Razak to President Yudhoyono.

Too good to be true?

Against the growing regional tensions, Dr Yudhoyono called a press conference at the palace. “For what has happened”, he said, “as President, I say sorry, and seek the understanding of our brothers in Singapore and Malaysia”. He also rebuked his ministers and officials for their undiplomatic remarks that aggravated the haze-related tensions. “There are statements by several office-holders that I feel need not be put across that way. Sometimes the facts have not been checked, and that becomes an issue. This has become a concern from Singapore and Malaysia”.

But the President was virtually alone; indeed, the blowback against him was swift. His statesman-like apology struck a nationalistic nerve and was almost instantly attacked by sections of Jakarta’s elite, including a former vice-president, and the vocal media. Dr Yudhoyono was criticised for being “submissive”, “excessive” and “dragging down national pride”. A common thread in all these attacks was the view that an Indonesian apology was out of place given that Singapore- and Malaysian-linked companies could be as complicit in the Sumatran fires. In truth, some of the Singapore-linked players are Indonesian-owned. Virtually all of the companies with Sumatran plantations claim to have a zero-burning policy.

President Yudhoyono, nonetheless, ticked off the Riau provincial government for being slow to act, citing this as a reason why he invoked his presidential authority to step in and deploy fire-fighting troops. Indeed, his intervention was a significant turn of events. In so doing, though somewhat belatedly, he had demonstrated how, with political will, Indonesia could move decisively. Indeed, as a result, the number of hotspots for the haze-causing forest fires were reduced dramatically.

Environmental politics and its implications

There are several conclusions or implications from this latest twist in the long-standing haze problem which has afflicted Southeast Asia without a clear resolution since 1997. Firstly, despite 15 years into the post-Suharto *reformasi* era that has been marked by political reform and *desentralisasi*, Indonesia is still adjusting to the downside of a decentralised political system.

Secondly, while power has been diffused to the provinces in a more democratic system, this has also slowed down national decision-making. At the same time, national challenges, including corruption, have also been decentralised. What used to be a problem centred in Jakarta is now spread to the regions. Nothing is more illustrative than the current detention of the Riau governor on corruption allegations partly linked to forestry permits.

Thirdly, Indonesia’s neighbours will have to live with the spillover effects of a regional giant that is still finding its feet despite more than a decade of reformation. *Demokratisasi*, or the democratisation of the political system, has produced a legislature or MPR that proudly defends its independence of the Executive. This is why Indonesia is the only member state that has yet to ratify the 2002 ASEAN Agreement on Haze – even though the Indonesian government has signed the pact 11 years ago.

Fourthly, it is troubling that Indonesian MPs, absorbed in the legislative politics in Jakarta, do not seem to fathom the corrosive implications the non-ratification of an international agreement the country has signed may have in the long-run: it can undermine regional confidence in Indonesia’s commitment to pacts, and eventually its leadership in ASEAN. Who in the political system will bear that responsibility?

Fifthly, environmental politics in the region will intensify as challenges arising from climate change – such as sea-level rise and climate refugees -- get worse over time and stress intra-ASEAN ties. There are two things the political elite in Jakarta must do: One, take the 2002 ASEAN Agreement on Haze seriously and ratify it without further delay. Two, reform the reformed political system – even if it means embarking on a new phase of *reformasi*. Otherwise, Southeast Asia will be unsettled by the prospect of a friendly power being also a source of the region’s future problems.

Yang Razali Kassim is Senior Fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.