

# Transboundary Haze: Asean's Hazy Efforts in Engagement

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In June 2013, you would probably have been either scrolling the timeline of your Facebook or Twitter accounts, or reading the newspaper and you would have found that the topic trending was the haze. Malaysia and Singapore were badly affected by the haze that followed the forests fires in Riau. The Air Pollution Index escalated to more than 700, a clear sign of danger. The negative consequences of the haze faced by Malaysians and Singaporeans included the disruption of daily activities, schools being shut down, and the cancellation and delay of domestic flights. All these resulted in unease.

Environmental lawyers have accused Indonesia of not complying with international laws. This is when the issue of externality comes into play. In economics, an externality is a cost or benefit that results from an activity or transaction that affects an otherwise uninvolved party who did not choose to incur that cost or benefit (Buchanan, James; Wm. Craig Stubblebine (November 1962). "Externality," *Economica* 29 (116): 371–384). Externality can be either positive externality or negative externality. Undoubtedly, the haze is an example of negative externality. It affects a great number of people who do not have the choice of accepting or rejecting the negative effects hence raising

debate and criticism among many. Nevertheless, in the absence of a higher authority, states remain dominant in decision-making as it is a state's obligation to protect national sovereignty and credibility. Pushing for Indonesia to observe a more structured framework of environmental laws has been a difficult task, although a few accords have been planned and implemented in the past decades.

The effectiveness of various agreements by Asean, especially those involving the three affected countries was questioned since this setback was not the first. In 1997, the API reading had exceeded 1000. While progressive cooperation was only witnessed after the severe haze in 1997, Asean had previously managed to reach a consensus with the establishment of the



*A woman photographing the severe haze shrouding high-rise buildings in Singapore*

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'KL Accord on Environment' in the year 1990, followed by the 'Singapore Resolution on Environment and Development' in February 1992 and also the 'Asean Cooperation Plan on Transboundary Pollution' in 1995.

Then, in 1997 the three countries combined efforts to implement the 'Asean Regional Haze Action Plan' (RHAP). On the whole, RHAP's focus was more on quick and effective action and less talk. The same themes can be observed in the 'Asean Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution' (ATHP) that was signed in 2002. Forum after forum concerning capacity-building efforts was held accompanied by joint exercises involving stakeholders, and yet the problem persists as if there have been no agreements in the first place.

Questions concerning Asean's policies have once again come to the fore. The non-interference element in the 'Asean Way' has long been criticized as one of the biggest barriers to successful conflict resolution in Southeast Asia. Though Asean is a regional bloc consisting of ten different countries with common goals and aspirations, dissimilarities in their respective experiences in handling disputes are responsible for creating discord in their actions, especially in Asean's participation and obligations as a functional regional bloc. The fact remains that Asean's capabilities are limited by its lack of assertiveness in decision-making and also the absence of a mature security community.

Coming back to the subject of the recent transboundary haze, while Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono apologized to

Malaysia and Singapore, Indonesia remained obstinate in its refusal to ratify the 2002 ATHP. Upon the urging of Singapore and Malaysia, however, it finally made the decision to ratify the agreement. In a statement, Arief Yuwono, Indonesia's Deputy Minister of Environmental Degradation Control and Climate Change claimed Indonesia would boost its efforts to speed up the ratification process so that it would be concluded either at the end of this year or early next year.

Is this a sign of Indonesia's commitment towards better environment protection in the region? Are we seeing a more stable and cooperative environment in Asean? These remain questions as the expected cooperation and mutual understanding that ought to exist in an established regional bloc are somehow missing due to Asean's lack of determination in building a set of solid, uniform principles, although the Asean Community goal is expected to be achieved by the year 2015.

This further proves that we are not ready for any mutual commitment with regard to integration similar to the European Union (EU) model. The EU reflects extensive economic and political integration which has assisted in demolishing barriers caused by domestic policies of countries in the region.

However, can strong political and economic integration really change Asean's approach in dealing with regional issues in the future? One good thing that came out of the EU's vocal criticism of Asean was the introduction of the constructive engagement policy by Thailand's

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*The Petronas Twin Towers seen through the haze in Kuala Lumpur*

foreign minister Surin Pitsuwan. Critical yet subtle, this policy gave Asean the chance to revamp its image in the eyes of the world. Nonetheless, when discussing aligning domestic policies with those at the regional level, priority will always be on maintaining self interest. Obviously, it is unlikely for a country to compromise its own interests as this is the essential engine for state survival.

The evidence of failing constructive engagement can be witnessed further in the usual disputes and the blame game among Asean

countries, resulting in a vain struggle to establish concrete rapport within the community.

Asean should sort out this lack of consensus among its members urgently since it is evident that it possesses a medium (the regional bloc itself) to create a firm, beneficial stance. Be it the issue of the economy, the environment, or security, all discord should be resolved coherently and harmoniously by all stakeholders for the sake of peace and stability.