BRINGING BACK MULTILATERAL COOPERATION IN NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY GOVERNANCE

Image Source: The New Humanitarian

Contents

OVERVIEW

Non-traditional security (NTS) issues continue to threaten the well-being of nations and communities in Asia and around the world. Multilateral cooperation, efficient and timely deployment of resources, and a long-term vision of sustainable development are needed to address ever-complex and transboundary implications of these threats, ranging from climate change and disasters to mass movement of people in search of refuge and safety. Given that traditional, state-led multilateralism is in retreat, a more sustainable approach to multilateral cooperation is critically needed, requiring the collaborative participation and engagement of multiple state and non-state actors, from local communities, civil society organisations, the private sector, regional organisations, and other international agencies.

The Annual Conference of the Consortium of Non-Traditional Security in Asia (NTS-Asia), held in Singapore on 25-26 March 2019, examined the need to advance multisectoral multilateralism to comprehensively address a number of NTS challenges including, among others, irregular and forced migration, climate change, digital threats, economic inequality and social fragmentation. This report is a summary of recommendations put forward at the NTS-Asia Conference towards promoting deeper multilateral cooperation in NTS governance and highlights its relevance to Asia, including the ASEAN region.

IRREGULAR AND FORCED MIGRATION AS HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCIES

1. Asian countries have recently seen humanitarian crises arising from large-scale flows of irregular and forced migrants. These movements have significantly tested national governments' capacities to manage responses, leading to more complex humanitarian crises for migrants and their communities. From 2004 to 2014, an estimated 191 million people in Southeast Asia were displaced temporarily by natural disasters.[1] Intractable internal conflicts in the region exacerbate the impact of climate change and natural disasters, creating thousands of refugees, irregular migrants and internally displaced persons. Persons fleeing from armed conflicts and humanitarian emergencies become highly vulnerable to trafficking in their desperate attempt to seek safety and protection. Two-thirds or 25 million of global trafficking victims were identified to be in the region.[2] Anti-trafficking efforts are hampered by poor law enforcement efforts as well as unsustainable rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for irregular migrants in their host communities, including rescued trafficking victims, also heighten their risk of being victimised again by traffickers or smugglers.

2. There is a need to pursue national and regional strategies and action plans to address the causes of forced migration and to provide irregular migrants and trafficking victims with adequate protection, health and other basic services. States could consider a wide range of migration measures, including mainstreaming migration into national development initiatives, synergising frameworks on migration and humanitarian assistance, enhancing public-private partnerships, working with civil society groups, and empowering migrants and diaspora communities.

3. Asian countries can contribute through sustainable development investments in areas of acute exposure to natural hazards to enhance the resilience of their local economies as part of their contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals. Furthermore, national governments, in partnership with the civil society, international organisations, and the private sector, could develop training programmes for local government officials to build capacity as part of a comprehensive response in areas exposed to natural hazards, migrant smuggling and human trafficking operations.

INCOME INEQUALITY AS A THREAT TO ECONOMIC SECURITY

4. In spite of ASEAN's economic growth success over the past decades, economic disparities have increased— both across and within countries. Economic inequality should not be just measured in monetary terms, as other equally important indicators need to be considered: quality of public health and education, gender disparities in labour markets, and access to services such as water, sanitation, and electricity. Why is rising inequality a threat? The economic difficulties of rural low-income and urban poor communities can potentially incite destabilising political movements such as in India, Bangladesh, Thailand, the Philippines and Myanmar. Income inequality amplifies other NTS threats to impoverished communities in Asia. The poorest of the poor are also more vulnerable in times of shocks — be it natural disasters or complex humanitarian emergencies— as the loss of lives, assets and disrupted supply chains affect them more than the wealthier sections of the society.

5. As rising income and human development gaps remain unaddressed, Asia's regional and national policy makers should revisit their priorities and work together to prevent the current trend from continuing. More efforts should be made to mainstream capacity-building assistance and human resource development in regional and national economic development agenda. Greater investment in education and skills training, especially for low-income and marginalised groups, could prevent

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[1] *ASEAN Vision 2025 on Disaster Management*. Jakarta: The ASEAN Secretariat, 2016.
[2] Walk Free Foundation. Global Slavery Index 2018. https://www.globalslaveryindex.org/2018/findings/regional-analysis/asia-and-the-pacific/

them from falling too far behind. Other Asian countries could build on ASEAN's efforts in narrowing the economic gap between CLMV[3] countries and the more developed ASEAN Member States, through human resource development and capacity-building assistance.

6. A people-centred approach is also integral to addressing economic insecurities. Given the rapid changes in regional and global environment, it is important to examine (i) how the current technological wave may cause greater displacement of labour and (ii) how increasing economic inequalities between classes and between gender can exacerbate existing discriminatory practices. These factors disrupt the political, economic and social stability of a country, and can undermine both national and regional governance systems that are in place. As such they can morph into other kinds of non-traditional challenges to ASEAN's security, governance and leadership.

A CIRCULAR ECONOMY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

7. There are compelling reasons why the principles of a circular economy are relevant for the region. The plastic pollution is choking Asia's seas and river systems. Microplastics from ten rivers in the world—eight of which are in Asia—are polluting the world's oceans. China, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam have been identified as major sources of plastic pollution, accounting for up to 60 percent of the plastic waste leaking into the ocean.[4] Regional water bodies are facing severe environmental deterioration because of over-abstraction of groundwater and uncontrolled pollution of regional seas. Southeast Asia, for instance, may face a 30 percent shortfall in the needed freshwater to support the regional economy by 2030.

8. Regional efforts must be enhanced to promote greater public awareness of the principles of circular economy. Asian governments should consider adopting a circular economy approach through the formulation of their circular economy masterplans. In this regard, they can lead and encourage the region to embark on a similar transformative path. Businesses can adopt the circular economy practices in their host countries. With advances in science, technology and education, the private sector could consider strengthening support for regional collaboration in research and development of technologies and products that are more environmentally friendly.

IDENTITY POLITICS, PLURALISM AND COHESIVE SOCIETIES

9. In culturally diverse regions of Asia, many countries are confronted with multiple challenges from the use of ethnicity, race or religion to sow societal division. Contemporary sociopolitical challenges in many Asian societies emanate from identity politics, manifested in several forms: using religion in politics, tribalism and ultra-nationalism. Furthermore, some multi-ethnic states have had to deal with protracted internal conflicts from armed rebellions and separatists groups.

10. Given similarities of multi-ethnic and religiously diverse communities, Asian countries could do more to share about their national experiences, lessons learnt, and policies in fostering social cohesiveness. International dialogues could be organised to focus on promoting comprehensive programmes on civic and peace education, in collaboration with academic institutions; strengthening local mechanisms on conflict prevention and resolution; and synergising national programmes on countering violent extremism.

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[3] Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam
[4] McKinsey & Company and Ocean Conservancy. *Stemming the Tide: Land-based strategies for a plastic- free ocean*. McKinsey & Company and Ocean Conservancy, September 2015. https://oceanconservancy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/full-report-stemming-the.pdf

11. Despite achieving religious and racial harmony, Asian countries, including some ASEAN Member States, are not immune from external interests seeking to create cleavages in their social fabric. Emphasising common-ness rather than diversity and exercising the rule of law to maintain peace are ways to maintain social cohesion. It will do well for countries to be constantly vigilant to divisive forces while fostering closer cooperation among different communities in Asia.

DIGITALISATION AND COUNTERING SECURITY THREATS

12. Contemporary threats to social cohesiveness and peacebuilding in ethnically diverse countries may also emanate from widespread online falsehoods and disinformation, which are unintended consequences of digitalisation. Addressing new threats like disinformation, cyberterrorism, online radicalisation, and data hacking could no longer be resolved by one state, requiring multilateral collaboration at the regional and global levels. Given recent cyber attacks on key institutions and databases in several ASEAN Member States, there is a sense of urgency for regional states to build a resilient and innovative digital community together, with the top 1,000 ASEAN companies could lose $750 billion from cyber attacks.[5]

13. In this regard, a holistic regional cyber security strategy for countering online radicalisation and terrorist operations needs to be developed. Running parallel to legislations and regulations that could be introduced are public education and awareness programmes on processing and fact-checking information, focusing on every layer and sector of society. In this regard, multi-sectoral and multilateral platforms should engage equally important institutions such as youth councils, civil society organisations, think tanks, universities, and religious and secular schools.

14. Proposals for the creation of a formal ASEAN cyber security mechanism are currently being studied to bolster regional defences and create a dialogue for cyber diplomacy, policy and operations.[6] A Regional Team with a range of skill-sets and character traits is needed to evaluate security of digital systems, identify vulnerabilities that could be exploited, and determine malicious activities. ASEAN Member States should work together to promote greater public awareness on cyber security and adopt best practices to bolster digital security and address cyber threats.

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[5] John Brandon. "Why ASEAN Needs to Invest More in Cybersecurity." *Asia Foundation*, 9 May 2018. https://asiafoundation.org/2018/05/09/why-asean-needs-to-invest-more-in-cybersecurity/
[6] Cyber Security Agency of Singapore. "ASEAN Member States Agree to Strengthen Cyber Coordination and Capacity-Building Efforts." 19 September 2018. https://www.csa.gov.sg/news/press-releases/amcc-2018