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A New Series

Clearing the Diplomatic Haze: Indonesia's Tense Ties with Singapore and Malaysia

By Tiola Javadi and David Han

Synopsis

The recent haze has engulfed parts of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. The worsening air quality, along with trenchant statements by Indonesian officials, has been causing tensions among the three countries.

Commentary

WHENEVER THE haze is back, it is usually followed by an intense blame game, matched by state officials marching to high-level talks to find yet another mechanism to address the problem. As soon as the sky clears up and the dust settles, commitments made during the meetings quickly evaporate.

For the past 18 years, haze from forest fires has been an annual problem in Indonesia, which has been rooted in the slash-and-burn method used by companies to clear large chunks of land to make space for plantations. The worsening air quality due to the haze, along with provocative statements made by Indonesian officials, has been causing tensions among the three countries.

Unapologetic posture?

A statement by Vice President Jusuf Kalla which denounced Singapore and Malaysia for complaining about the haze had irritated many people in all three countries, including many Indonesians who feel that such a view does not represent their feelings. "For 11 months, they enjoyed clean air from Indonesia and they never thanked us. They suffered because of the haze for one month and they get upset," Kalla said. Although this remark came from the country's vice president, it hardly represents the official position of Indonesia. Nor does it reflect the plight of millions of Indonesians suffering from the haze and smoke pollution in Sumatra and Kalimantan.

Indonesian Member of Parliament in charge of environment and international relations Hamdhani Mukhdar Said recently expressed the country's apology to neighbouring Singapore and Malaysia for the haze, highlighting that Jakarta has allocated US\$1 million to provinces bearing the brunt of forest fires. Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs Luhut Pandjaitan had also engaged

in a high-level meeting with Singapore Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen, explaining that Indonesia took the matter very seriously.

Similar apologies were made by previous presidents for the haze from forest fires in the late 1990s and early 2000s. But apology is one thing, taking tangible action is another. So far, Jakarta has deployed 19 choppers and two Air Tractor planes for water bombing, as well as four aircraft to conduct cloud-seeding operations. Additionally, Indonesia is planning to hire a Russian-made amphibious tanker aircraft to deal with raging fires. Although these actions demonstrate the country's seriousness in addressing the problem, they are largely reactive in nature.

Indonesia's confusing attitude towards aid

Indonesia's attitude towards Singapore's offer of help has been confusing. On the sidelines of the 70th UN General Assembly in New York, Kalla asserted that Indonesia is open to receiving assistance, and demanded Singapore not to "just talk, but come [to help]". However, Cabinet Secretary Pramono Anung and Environment and Forestry Minister Siti Nurbaya Bakar asserted that Jakarta will continue to overcome the problem without outside help.

The reluctance to accept help may well be rooted in the current administration's nationalistic stance, but may also have practical reasons. Indonesia itself has conducted water bombing and cloud seeding using dozens of aircraft and deployed around 3,000 troops on the ground. However, the result has been limited as fighting the fire can prove to be difficult when sometimes they are not visible and rage on some three to five metres below the surface. Government officials also often cite the difficulty arising from maintaining coordination between Singapore officers and local agencies, if Singapore were to help.

Limits of diplomacy in tackling haze problem

Like Singapore, Malaysia is also eager to assist Indonesia tackle the haze problem. Malaysia's Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein indicated that he would contact his counterpart in Singapore to discuss how Malaysia could come in to assist. Malaysia's Minister of Natural Resources and Environment Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar stated that Malaysia is ready to provide expertise and knowledge such as the prevention of peatland fires. A fresh start may be made now that Indonesia's Foreign Ministry has confirmed that they will accept offers of assistance from Singapore and elsewhere.

As the ASEAN Chair for 2015, Malaysia has sought to steer ASEAN to take a firmer stance against haze pollution. On 8 September 2015 at the 36th General Assembly of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak urged all ten member states to engage in a collective effort to tackle the haze problem.

Malaysia recognises that the haze problem, if prolonged, could strain relations among the three countries. Given the confusing verbal exchanges between Indonesia and Singapore on the haze issue, Malaysia wishes to avoid a similar outcome in its relations with Indonesia in this matter. Furthermore, Malaysian PM Najib has reiterated that people in Southeast Asia have the right to clean air.

Although Malaysia and Singapore are offering firefighting assistance to Indonesia, these efforts are limited as they do not substantially address several root causes of the fires which are inherent within the Indonesian domestic scene, such as weak governance arising from decentralisation and collusion between plantation companies and local authorities. Although Malaysia and Singapore can do little to address these domestic issues directly without risking their relations with Indonesia, Singapore's action against errant corporations setting fire to their land concessions has been emulated by Indonesia cracking down on dozens of companies doing the same.

Long term and concerted efforts needed

Both regional and domestic efforts are necessary to combat the haze problem. At the regional level, there should be more concerted efforts to develop enforcement mechanisms to tackle haze fires. Positively, at the 17th Meeting of the Sub-Regional Steering Committee on Transboundary Haze

Pollution held in Jakarta in July this year, Indonesia and Malaysia agreed to sign a Memorandum of Understanding on Transboundary Haze to enable both countries to engage in greater cooperation in addressing haze issues. Indonesia would also be signing similar MOUs with Singapore, Thailand and Brunei.

The Indonesian government also has to address domestic root causes that have contributed to the haze. Firstly, law enforcement would have to be strengthened to deal with the corruption as a result of collusion between local officials and plantation companies. Secondly, institutional reforms should be implemented to address the weaknesses inherent in the decentralisation of regional governance. It is important to regulate burning activities and bring to task errant companies or individuals which are responsible for illegal forest fires.

Putting out present fires to reduce the haze is only a stop gap measure. President Jokowi has initiated a long term measure to cut canals through peatlands to prevent fires from combusting during dry seasons. "Burning" issues, such as the lack of an effective regional response to the haze problem, and ongoing domestic concerns in Indonesia, would continue to rage on for years to come before a viable, long term solution is finally in place to clear the air of haze in this part of the world.

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