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The Rise of Trump and Its Global Implications

Trump's Impending U-turn on Climate Change: Worry for Southeast Asia?

By Margareth Sembiring

Synopsis

US president-elect Donald Trump's environmental commitments appear elusive. His remarks on climate change and his recent nominees for cabinet members have stirred domestic concerns surrounding climate-related issues. Would Southeast Asia need to be concerned too?

Commentary

US PRESIDENT-ELECT Donald Trump, during his election campaign, announced his plan to withdraw the United States from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. The landmark Agreement that entered into force on 4 November 2016 is a product of two decades of negotiations and in which 197 countries pledge to keep global warming to well below 2 degree Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

The US' ratification of the Paris Agreement was greeted with much enthusiasm particularly since the US opted out of the preceding 1997 Kyoto Protocol. As a party to the Agreement, the US aims to bring down greenhouse gas emission by 26 to 28 percent from 2005 levels by the year 2025. It reportedly means a potential reduction of 1.6 Gigatons of CO₂ equivalent from a Business as Usual scenario. Being the world's second biggest carbon emitter after China, such reduction will contribute greatly to the fight against climate change. Anxieties over Trump's threat to walk out of the Agreement are therefore not completely baseless.

Cause for Concern in Southeast Asia?

Subsequently Trump's recent choices of Scott Pruitt to head the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Cathy McMorris Rodgers as the Secretary of the Interior Department have raised further alarm. Both are reportedly known to be closely allied to the oil industry. With such an outlook, the Trump administration is feared to likely reverse the US' climate-friendly policies including Obama's Clean Power Plan. There are also worries that Trump may put a curb on the EPA's budget and frustrate other environment initiatives at federal level.

While much of the distressed murmur is currently happening within the US' domestic sphere, the Southeast Asia region may also need to brace for potential fallouts from Trump's possible anti-climate policies. As all ASEAN member states are listed under the Non-Annex I Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), or the 'developing countries' category, the region is admittedly in need of assistance in implementing its climate-related initiatives.

The Paris Agreement urges developed countries to mobilise US\$100 billion per year by 2020 for climate financing. The US has promised to contribute \$3 billion to the Green Climate Fund, making it the top donor of a total of close to \$10 billion pledged as of early December 2016. Should the US pull out from the Paris Agreement, as Trump proposed, its involvements in the Fund would likely be affected.

The long history of various environment-related collaborations in the Southeast Asian region may experience drawbacks as well. Back in 1992 during the Bush presidency, the US-Asia Environmental Partnership (AEP) was established with the aim of facilitating sustainable development in Asia. Additionally, the ASEAN-US Technical Assistance and Training Facility (ASEAN-US TATF) Phase II between 2007 and 2013 has assisted various ASEAN initiatives, including in developing ASEAN cities' capacity to measure and monitor carbon emissions using more advanced technologies.

The US was also involved in bringing together climate specialists from the US and ASEAN to exchange technical information pertaining to climate change adaptation at local level in the CityLinks Pilot Partnership.

Whither ASEAN-US Climate Change Cooperation?

In 2014, ASEAN and the US formally inked their commitments to address the changing climate in a Joint Statement on Climate Change. In the follow up to the Joint Statement, the USAID plans to disburse over \$60 million in support of environment-related programmes in the region. More recently in September 2016, the USAID Clean Power Asia was launched to encourage the development of renewable energy in Lower Mekong states and other ASEAN member states. The initiative, expected to cost a minimum of \$750 million in the course of five years, is projected to reduce at least three million metric tonnes of greenhouse gas emission.

The USAID, in particular its Regional Development Mission for Asia (RDMA), indeed plays a central role in executing the US global environmental agenda. The investments on forest management and clean power development were reported to amount to \$5 million and \$275 million respectively. Specifically on the forestry front,

realising the high carbon emissions emanating from massive deforestation activities in the region, the RDMA rolled out the million-dollar USAID Lowering Emissions in Asia's Forests (USAID LEAF) programme.

To support the operations of the US Department of State and the USAID, a budget request of \$50 billion was made early this year. With Trump picking Rex Tillerson, the CEO of oil corporation ExxonMobil, as the Secretary of State, the US' future financial commitments for the USAID and especially its environmental programmes have become less certain now.

Needed: US' Involvement in Global Environmental Agenda

While countries in Southeast Asia have developed their own policies, mechanisms and institutions to address climate-related issues, financial and technical assistance to operationalise them remain a necessity. Indonesia, for example, was the world's fourth largest carbon emitter in 2015 due largely to its burning forests.

As part of its efforts to stop annual forest fire issues and curb attendant carbon emissions, Indonesia launched a plan to restore two million hectares of its degraded peatlands early this year. To materialise such ambition, Indonesia is in need of sustainable financing.

Between 1990 and 2010, Southeast Asia experienced the fastest growth of carbon dioxide emissions from the use of fossil fuels. Looking at the contributions that the US could make in assisting climate initiatives in the region, its commitments to global environmental agenda are therefore critical. In the event the Trump administration decides to turn away from climate change, US involvement in Southeast Asia may get affected; countries in the region may potentially take longer to achieve their Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) pledged in the Paris Agreement.

The slowing down of climate-related progress due to a change of leadership in the US would augur ill not only for the Southeast Asian region but also for the world. While none of these worries have been proven, the consequences of a waning commitment from the US could already be foretold. And it will mean bad news for the green earth.

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