Climate Change and Asia: A New and Different Challenge

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For many years, states in East Asia were in denial about the environmental harms that were suffered and that affected so many people in the region. Whether it was transboundary issues like the haze in southeast Asia from fires in Indonesia, air pollution in Hong Kong, or acid rain in Northeast Asia; or whether it was local and national problems like polluted rivers and lakes in China, deforestation of rainforests, endangerment of species or bad air in many cities: Asian governments often excused the ills of environmental harms with the rapid rise of their economies. Environmental harm in this context was a necessary price to be paid. Environmental protection was, conversely, a luxury that could not be afforded.

In 2007, we have witnessed the start of a possible change in this fundamental attitude that sacrifices the environment for economic growth. In 2007, we have witnessed a rapid change in the awareness and concern in the world and in Asia about climate change. In this change, beyond the particular facts and figures, many more Asians including many in policy making circles have increasing come to be convinced about three key points. These points make climate change a priority and a challenge that differs from almost anything that has confronted the region before.

First, scientific consensus in our knowledge about climate change has made us all realize that the environmental harms portended are not a concern for the rich. Instead, the science suggests that tropical and developing countries, like most in Asia, will be worst hit, rather than those in the developed and temperate North. Within these countries, moreover, it will most often be the poorest communities that will be most affected, and vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. With this, Asian states cannot hide between the old rhetoric and finger pointing of the North/ South divide.

Secondly, analysis of climate change has suggested that there is an inseparable and complex relationship between environment and the economy, especially energy. For all of the modern industrial age, where an economy grows, its use of energy must grow. Indeed, in the experiences of almost all developed countries, there is an intensification in energy use as industrialization moves forward and patterns of consumption and lifestyles

change. As energy consumption grew, in this age of coal, oil and gas, the amount of carbon also grew and has, as we recognize belatedly, affected the global environment. There is, as such, an interlocking triangle between economic growth, energy use and environmental harms.

We need to unlock this triangle. To grow without increasing energy, we have to be more energy efficient (Asians are not, with some exceptions such as Japan and, to a lesser extent, Singapore). To generate energy without increasing carbon, we have to grow alternative and renewable energy. If we cannot unlock this triangle, the relationship between economy, energy and the environment will turn negative: unsustainable economic growth will undermine the environmental basis for that very growth and indeed our present existence. On the other hand, if we are to unlock the triangle, we will need to release energies, innovative approaches and enterprise that can create many new opportunities as we reshape our economy and better protect the environment.

Thirdly, climate change is not an issue that implicates only governments or a single or limited range of activities and actors. Rather, addressing climate change will require reaching the broadest range of actors across society – individuals, households, farmers, companies, transport and energy providers – and into the fullest range of activities. As such, efforts to inform people about climate change and to lead them to taking action will not be a simple effort for government to make and enforce new rules. Rather, it must be an effort that includes and involves many more actors and in many more ways beyond command and control regulations.

It follows from these three points of difference that Asian states cannot deal with climate change as they have with past environmental challenges or deny it as they have other environmental issues. These are some of the priorities that emerge for Asian states:

1. To understand and evaluate the cost of likely impacts of climate change, for each state and collectively.
2. To create multi-agency, multi-sectoral and multi-level frameworks for evaluating, and aligning policies and actions to address climate change in terms of policies for energy, economy, security and finance, and not just the environment.

3. To consider how they can and should cooperate with each other in the region, and with others globally, to address these concerns, and to reduce negative competition in energy and other resources.
4. To consider what steps can be taken immediately or in the short term to mitigate their impacts on climate change that can be taken in tandem with improving efficiency, creating opportunities and with technological and other improvements to make them more competitive and robust.
5. To evaluate short term steps that, while seeming to address one or another aspect of climate change, economic growth and/ or energy insecurity, will not prove to be a mis-step in the future, like nuclear energy.
6. To be skeptical in evaluating claims about products, technologies and other offerings to address climate change and be prepared for complex assessments (e.g. biofuels).
7. To involve corporations, non governmental organizations and the widest possible range of actors in understanding and addressing climate change.