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Living in a haze

Abstract
Extract:
Once upon a time in a faraway place called the university classroom, students were being taught the new definition of security in the 1990s. It was no longer the Cold War's nuclear terror or the range and sophistication of our principal weapons systems. Power, nowadays, has more to do with trade and economics, the teacher intoned. Particularly the power of the global financial system.

Keywords
Southeast Asia, environmental security, 21st century, financial system

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CENTRE REPORT

Living in a Haze

Once upon a time in a faraway place called the university classroom, students were being taught the new definition of security in the 1990s. It was no longer the Cold War's nuclear terror or the range and sophistication of our principal weapons systems. Power, nowadays, has more to do with trade and economics, the teacher intoned. Particularly the power of the global financial system. Its capabilities are formidable: it can cripple whole nations. What counter-measures do we have? This question was soon to prove to be more than academic as the region underwent a severe financial crisis with currencies and stock markets plunging in value.

But if we are really methodical about it, the teacher continued, security ultimately rests in the condition of our physical environment. More to the point, it rests in the lap of the cultural disposition toward it. Do we seek to harmonise with nature, as some traditional and tribal cultures do? Or are we engaged in an environmental version of MAD - Mutually Assured Destruction - but without having realised that this is meant to be a deterrent, not a prediction? In other words, the assuredness of destroying ourselves if we destroy our environment should act as a powerful deterrent to engaging in acts hostile to the environmental; not a mere dispassionate description of a cause-and-effect relationship.

And so the lecture on 'security in the 1990s', before 1997, began in earnest. When it was pointed out that one of the main sources of environmental insecurity was deforestation, with about 25% of the world's remaining tropical forests found in Southeast Asia - 65% of them in Indonesia - nobody could have guessed that before decade's end the forests of Indonesia would be blazing out of control. With some 1.85 million burning acres plus smouldering subterranean peat, it was an environmental disaster ranked worse than Chernobyl and the EXXON Valdez supertanker oil spill.

This very scenario, seemingly academic and remote from reality, transpired in the second half of 1997 - as did the above mentioned Asian economic crisis. It revealed how multidimensional or 'comprehensive' the notion of security had become. One could even argue that security has been 'demilitarised' in the sense that war is only one member in a family of security factors. Indeed, soldiers gave way to firefighters and economists in those 'hazy' months of reversals.

While often decried as a euphemism for the persistent and debilitating smog blanketing much of Southeast Asia in August, September and October of 1997, the 'haze' is in many ways an aptly chosen term. It describes a state of mind as much as an environmental disaster shared by fraternal nations (the ASEANs) in the throes of financial crisis. Industrial growth seemed to have worked like an opiate on policy-making minds, blotting out the harsh reality of social, environmental, and even economic costs; much as the smog blotted out the sun day after day in the worst affected

period of September and October. As has occurred globally, a fixation on material growth has tended to elevate the least worthy elements of society, with damaging consequences to the human and natural world alike. The 'haze', therefore, also refers to the much remarked upon 'lack of transparency' in business and government.

By way of illustration are two items on 'hazy' ethics reported in the press on the same day. In one, the head of Indonesia's state-owned electricity company, PLN, complained to parliament of 'mismanagement' because of interference by 'outsiders' - a thinly veiled reference to close business associates of the President. The second reports the reinstatement of 45 of the 144 companies which had their timber clearing permits revoked in October. Thirty-six were timber companies and nine plantation businesses. Three of these reinstated operations were linked to 'timber baron' Bob Hasan.[1] Perhaps these companies have reformed themselves; perhaps not. Only the next 'burning off' season will tell.

This was not the first time Indonesia drew polite criticism of its crop clearance methods, whereby modern cash-crop cultivators and loggers would use fire to clear the land. Illegal as it was, the regulations against burning were ignored and unenforced; neighbouring countries would ingest the smoke, along with their own industrial pollution. Nothing changed until the 1997 *El Nino* weather phenomenon magnified the effects to such proportions that the lucrative tourist industry was damaged, transport services crippled and the normally uncomplaining citizens of Singapore and urban Malaysia publicly protested.

Many prayed; and not only for the rains to come. In Thailand, where the currency crisis first broke, prayer ceremonies were held for the country's economic survival. In neighbouring Malaysia, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad took matters in hand and called for regulation of the activities of currency speculators like George Soros. By contrast, US Federal Reserve board chairman Alan Greenspan thought recovery lay in less regulation. Survival and prosperity would come from opening markets 'to the full force of competition'.[2]

What does it all mean in terms of security? Environmental security, if it is not attended to, can undermine economic security in the long term and, because of poor environment and economy, political security would be at risk. Thus the environment is the most fundamental element in comprehensive security. It goes without saying that a culture which takes a cavalier attitude to the environment is also likely to display an equally dangerous disposition to other aspects of the socio-economic order.

Environmental security may be regarded as a supportive rather than exploitative relationship between a nation and its physical resources of air, water, wood, and minerals. A nation which supports the health of its environment is a nation which is, in turn, supported and enriched by that environment. A nation which exploits the environment at rates beyond recovery will destroy the basis of its own support. Clearly, there is a rational argument for sound environmental policies and practices. Such an

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1 *The Australian*, 4 December 1997, p. 8.

2 'Global Force Will Arise From Crisis: Fed', *The Australian*, 4 December 1997, p. 32.

argument directly addresses the vital interests of the modern nation-state: the interests of survival and strength.

Environmental security is also a progressive force for regional cooperation. Because ecological issues - like the 1997 'haze' - do not confine themselves to national borders, one country's problems can become its neighbour's problems too. Contamination of air, rivers and seas affects the environment of other countries too. By the same token, it is not particularly sensible for a government to place bans on the logging of its own rainforests if it means that it will plunder that of its neighbour's, taking advantage of such a neighbour's dire need for revenue. The consequences are that weather and climate problems emerge. For example, in Thailand as elsewhere, flooding and drought are attributed to loss of forests. Moreover, in accordance with the intercausality of different aspects of security, diminishing the environmental security of one's neighbours destabilises them economically and politically too. Living next to unstable countries obviously heightens one's own sense of threat.

Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand have engaged in major programs of forest exploitation. All these countries have since put in place regulations against over-harvesting. Often the regulations have been ignored, just as the regulations against using fire to clear land were recently flouted. While much depends on enforcement of existing regulations within each country, there is widespread agreement that environmental issues can only be addressed effectively within a framework of subregional and regional cooperation. Such a framework would need to be strong enough to deal with conflicts of interest when they arise. As nations realise that their security cannot be assured independent of others - and this is true of politico-military security, economic security, as well as environmental security - they will have to function as a group. Southeast Asia's political culture of consensus-building, pragmatism and long time-horizons should serve the cooperative enterprise well. So, too, does religious culture offer support; Buddhist monks in Thailand are especially active in forest protection. Above all, as in all things, there needs to be the political will to succeed. Again, Southeast Asia has a strength in this respect, as demonstrated by ASEAN.

For 21st century strategists in ASEAN and beyond, environmental security will be increasingly appreciated as the alpha and omega of comprehensive security. From it all other forms of security are possible; remove it and other definitions of security collapse. The pressing issue is one of time. Cooperative practices need to be in place sooner rather than later. When we hear of an environmental concern being treated as a matter of 'national security', we can say that the notion of multi-dimensional security has come of age. There is evidence that this is now occurring in some instances. Notice that the 'haze' was declared an 'emergency' in the Malaysian state of Sarawak, just as the communist insurgency had been in the 1950s. Notice, too, that on the economic front, Dr Mahathir announced in November that Malaysia would establish a 'national economic action council with emergency powers', an approach which he likened to the Communist Emergency.[3] In December, an agreement between Indonesia and Malaysia was reached regarding the prevention of future 'haze' pollution.[4]

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[3] Ian Stewart, 'Mahathir Takes Measure', *The Weekend Australian*, 22-23 November 1997, p. 14.

[4] 'KL, Jakarta to Sign MOU on Handling Disasters', *The Straits Times* (Interactive), 10 December 1997.

Not everyone has become as focused as the ASEAN countries on the merits of '*eco*-nomic' planning as a result of their latest environmental and economic traumas. Globally, neither the 1992 Rio Earth Summit nor the 1997 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Kyoto demonstrated that environmental security rated as highly in the post-Cold war era as military security had rated in the Cold War nuclear era. These are still transitional times. It would be instructive to observe how self-organising the ASEAN members can be in their sense of direction. In this respect it is well to remember that the Philippines leader, Fidel Ramos, spoke of the need for 'painful adjustments' to deal with both environmental and financial problems.[5] Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said of the smog: 'We must learn from this experience. The question of public health and the protection of the environment should be the main agenda in our country.'[6]

Perhaps most telling of the threat to the nation-state posed by an environmental emergency like the 1997 'haze' is the tribute paid to firemen from one country who fight fires in another. They are no mere heroes, but honoured as 'warriors'. On 1 October, the *New Straits Times* reported that: 'Malaysian firemen who have been sent to Indonesia to help put out forest fires there can be called "warriors" as their contribution was beyond the call of duty.' But well within the regional scope of environmental danger. These warriors were hailed not by the defence department or, more pertinently in view of the currency crisis, the finance ministry. It was the minister of social development who spoke of this measure of national pride. In accordance with another congruent feature of 1990s-style security, he was explicitly inclusive: 'By helping our neighbour we are helping ourselves at the same time.'[7] The last word, however, goes to Indonesia's Environment Minister, Sarwono Kusumaatmadja:

> If we don't change our ways we won't survive as a nation. I hope this time we make doubly sure it [the fires] won't happen again, otherwise we'll be out of business forever.[8]

The lesson for 1998, inside the classroom and out, cannot be clearer.

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[5] Paul Kelly, 'Some Tigers have a Low Pain Threshold', *The Australian*, 15 October 1997, p. 13.

[6] 'Call to Implement Transboundary Pollution Plan', *Borneo Post*, 7 October 1997, p. 1.

[7] Social Development Minister Datuk Adenan Satem, quoted in *New Straits Times*, 1 October 1997, p. 7.

[8] Quoted in Patrick Walters, 'When an Archipelago Isn't an Island Entire of Itself', *The Australian*, 9 October 1997, p. 13.