An Analysis of Possibilities and Limitations of ASEAN’s Disaster Management on Its Cooperation with ASEAN Countries in the Case of Thailand

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Abstract—This paper discusses possibilities and limitations of ASEAN’s international disaster endeavors by inclusively analyzing how ASEAN has been pursuing effective means to cooperate with its member countries hoping that in turn will bring about regional resilience and the assurance of continuous development among its members. In the case of ASEAN-Thailand cooperation in disaster management, findings show remarkable limitations of ASEAN’s aspiration in seeking the consolidation and consistency in its constructed policies, implementation plans and coordination with national policies, dissimilar political circumstances and development of its individual member countries. Seeing awaitng challenges of vigorous international cooperation on disaster management and the ASEAN’s endeavors prevailing for longer than two decades, the possibilities of achieving ASEAN’s plans have been laying on the determined progress of ASEAN political integration in the foreseeable future.

Keywords: ASEAN, natural disaster, disaster management, four-phase approach, international cooperation

I. INTRODUCTION

A number of natural disasters that have taken place have exceeded the capability of a single nation that varies across national governments. Due to that reason, the affected countries will cry for the international community to assist them in the disaster responses and recovery. The international community and individual countries are seeking comprehensive and effective natural disaster management. Rarely have affected countries gained international community interest in recognizing the need of contribution to natural disasters occurring within other countries’ national borders. Countries in the present international system tend to cooperate more on humanitarian assistance and resilience building through international agreements and cooperation. When the disaster took place and it yielded disastrous results to the humanity, both international governmental organizations and non-governmental organizations play crucial roles in leading international cooperation for international cooperation on disaster management e.g. the United Nations and ASEAN. Even though there is no universal formula for effective international disaster management, many potential countries have agreed upon some inclusive policies and action plans for disaster management which is based upon four specific elements of natural disaster responses including risk assessment, prevention and mitigation, preparation and emergency response - a Four-Phase Approach [1]. ASEAN has started to consider cooperation on disaster management and emergency responses since its first inception in 1967 even though initially ASEAN paid more attention to the dimension of a collectively prosperous economy and regional security and stability. According to World Bank’s report of ‘Strong, Safe and Resilient,’ [2] the Asia Pacific Region is considered the most vulnerable to the impacts of natural disasters in the world. Importantly, the report also discloses that a big number of the countries in the said region have been facing tremendous challenges that in turn limit their potential to cope with hash disasters either from natural disasters or manmade disasters. Their incapability includes inadequate institutional arrangements, ineffective coordination during the disaster, insufficient capacity to assess risks, both ex ante and ex post, and restricted financial and human resources who are equipped with knowledge and skills important for the on-site operation and planning [3].

ASEAN countries are currently confronting common natural disasters such as earthquakes, landslides, volcanic eruptions, floods, storms, droughts, and forest fires that have caused tremendous loss of peoples’ lives and properties. Significantly, the consequences of natural disasters have caused remarkably poverty and debt to ASEAN populations. With the occurring climate change situation, natural disasters have been unpredictable as well as more frequent and devastating. The incapability to cope with natural disasters could eventually cause a delay in pace for ASEAN to reach its aspiring goals for its ASEAN Community.

ASEAN does include substantial action plans on its declarations and agreements for disaster management and emergency response. However, ASEAN’s role in disaster management regarding the 4 strategies on disaster management included risk assessment, prevention and mitigation, preparations and emergency response and recovery do not gain adequate attention from ASEAN countries when comparing to its economic and political aspects. There are major questions concerning the possibilities and limitations of ASEAN’s disaster management implementations in ASEAN countries, since the current situation of each ASEAN countries
vary and becomes the potential factors to the success or failure of the implementations of ASEAN's disaster management. A huge burden to coping with unstable domestic affairs, regarding political, economic and social issues could prevent ASEAN governments from international cooperation, and cause the countries to ignore the plans for disaster management, as it is not considered an important issue when compared to others such as unstable politics, slowdown in the economy or social issues. When one wide-scale natural disaster can destroy infrastructures and important human resources working toward political and economic goals of a given country, ASEAN should be prepared for the worst and find effective ways to cooperate among ASEAN countries to encounter the negative results of its disaster management.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research method. Documentation and secondary data research play an important source of data analysis. The simplistic view of qualitative research design serves to elucidate an analysis on the possibilities and limitations as the research deals with the collection of non-numerical data, policies and implementation plans of ASEAN and Thailand. As an interpretative paradigm associated with qualitative research strategies, interpretations of relevant documents and observations then defines the feature of the study design [4].

III. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

There are diverse ranges of natural disasters faced by the member countries of ASEAN including floods, landslides, earthquakes, tsunamis, pandemic disease outbreaks and trans-boundary hazes. In responding to all these prevailing natural disasters, each country in the region also adopted varieties of policies and plans. With the establishment of ASEAN, vulnerable countries came and joined the international cooperation to cope with common disasters. It is deemed important for all ASEAN member countries to be alerted in creating functional disaster management and effective responses, as the natural disasters present a threat not only to life and property, but can also intervene and slow the continuity of the countries development. For instance, ASEAN has shown interesting attempts to reducing risk and enhancing resiliency to possible disasters and building the regional resilience and development by creating key entities including ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistances on Disaster Management (AHA Center) and the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) in which provide a framework for developing operational procedures for immediate and mutual responses of the member countries to cope with the disaster attacks [5]. In additions, ASEAN member countries have created mutual support agreements with external entities and countries outside the ASEAN region to improve their response capability and capacities.

From the historical records, Thailand has mostly been facing floods and landslides that have been caused by excessive rainfalls from tropical depressions and storms. In comparison to other ASEAN’s countries, Thailand has a low risk of natural disasters and Thailand is known as a non-disaster prone country as Thailand has moderate risk of natural and man-made hazards, with occasional occurrence of severe, large-scale disasters [6]. Thailand has yet encountered catastrophic disasters like volcanic eruptions and earthquakes because of its advantaged geographical terrains and location. However, these notations of Thailand and natural disaster situation cannot guarantee that Thailand has been fully secured form natural disasters. Having been caught unprepared by the natural disaster strikes, in most recent natural disasters the Tsunamis in 2004 and flash flood in 2011 in Thailand’s urbanized areas have led to questions of Thailand’s capabilities and limitations in coping with possible disasters in the future. Besides, with the handful of tasks and being inexperienced in disaster management and mitigation of the Thai government, Thailand will inevitably cry for international assistance. Disasters have occurred in Thailand, leading to undesirable consequences of rapid progress in economic and social development. Nonetheless, when the disastrous natural disaster occurred, the affected people relied on the national government to ensure its adequate and fast assistance to the impacted people even in the remote areas. Without consolidate plans and preparation to cope with critical situations, the government is unable to provide effective assistance and can even worsen the situation.

A. Limitations of ASEAN’s aspiration in seeking consolidate implementation and coordination courses with its member countries

In the past few decades, the disaster threats have significantly changed in occurrence and magnitude. Hazards such as floods, landslides, droughts, fire haze, earthquakes, tsunamis and now the threat of avian flu epidemics have become more common, trans-boundary and increasingly affected the lives and livelihoods of Thailand’s population. As a non-disaster prone country, Thailand was experienced in coping with the wide-scale natural disaster and seemed unaware when the incidents happened. However, it was also found that there is a limited cooperation with ASEAN in coping with the occurred incidents such as the incident of 2004 Tsunami and 2011 flash flood. Most of the international assistance came in various forms; through diplomatic channels which allowed regular donations and aids.

Thailand has the Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation which is responsible for coping with natural and man-made disasters, yet the department lacks human resources and the ability to consolidate implementation plans [7]. As centralization forms of administration, to cooperate with the international organizations or the individual countries ready for giving assistance, the DDPM has to coordinate with those international organizations through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs where they cannot assess the risks as there is an inadequate number of experts in disaster management. The disappearance of the unity of command for the DDPM prevents ASEAN from synchronizing its implementation plans with the receiving countries and that will eventually cause the
delay of the assistance and mismanagement of the international assistance that are pouring in. Inevitably, there are a number of obstacles that prevent Thailand from seeking consolidated implementation and coordination courses with ASEAN in the disaster management.

**B. The possibilities laying on the ASEAN political integration**

As the countries in ASEAN vary in their international systems, economic potential, political conditions and the efficacies of their governments, the effectiveness and the faster progress of their regional cooperation within the ASEAN framework and policies have heretofore casted its doubts.

ASEAN is made up of a group of Southeast Asian countries. In 1967, the increasing security concerns due to the war in Vietnam, the Cultural Revolution in new communist states like China and the surge of capitalist and communist rivalry by the great powers, US and USSR dominated the atmosphere in international politics of Southeast Asia. In such situations, the countries in Southeast Asia, despite their struggles in the aftermath of decolonization since 1945, attempted escaping the communist influence. From the reasons of security in stability of the countries in Southeast Asia, ASEAN has been moving towards its aspired goals of regional integrity in terms of social, economic, politics and security. Nevertheless, real integration does not come close when ASEAN members are still clinging on to the protection of their sovereignty and being revered to the practice of non-intervention policies. Development gaps of the ASEAN member countries and the inadequate attempts of the member countries to address the need of international cooperation for regional resilience and safety are among the key obstacles of the strong international cooperation in disaster management being led by ASEAN. It is arguable whether ASEAN countries should allow the porous borders and let in the real regional integration within ASEAN and to move towards the supranational government as which has happened in the European Union even though realizing the consistency and smoothness of cooperation on various dimensions drafted by the ASEAN Community on building plans. It is crucial to look back on to the predominant framework of the establishment of ASEAN which is based on liberalism and constructivist approaches where they denote the predominant trends of the regional relations. From the different perspectives of the constructivists, the emergence of common norms and a pan-regional identity are taking roots in the ASEAN Community [8].

1) **Will theGrowing trends of Regionalism promote ASEAN cooperation with its member countries in disaster management?**

Regionalism suggests that the way towards peace and prosperity is to have independent states pool their resources and even surrender some of their sovereignty to create integrated communities to promote economic growth or response to regional problems. ASEAN is one such institution that began as a regional community for encouraging multilateral cooperation in the security, economic and socio-cultural dimensions. Yet, to translate the approach into practice was found to be unpredictable. Although the world had become more pluralistic in terms of the actors involved in international interactions and these actors had become more dependent on each other, ASEAN countries seem to lack effective policies that encouraged the real integration both at the ministerial and individual level of complex interdependence (1) increasing linkages among states and non-states actors; (2) a new agenda of international issues with no distinction between low and high politics (3) a recognition of multiple channels for interaction among actors across national boundaries; and (4) the decline of efficacy of military force as a tool of statecraft [9].

While Cooperation is never without problems, states will shift loyalty and resources to institutions if these are seen as mutually beneficial and if they provide states with increasing opportunities to secure their international interests, ASEAN as an institution and regime could be a significant force in international relations.

2) **ASEAN and International Environmental Politics**

The growing trends of international environmental politics are helping to shape the course of analysis the possibilities and limitations of ASEAN and Thailand disaster management. The key concepts of international environmental politics deal with the interconnection and boundary transcend that allow for the impacts of natural disaster in spreading to other countries. Natural disasters do not respect boundaries and they can become trans-boundary issues. As a consequence, international environmental politics becomes an increasingly prominent topic in international agenda and have prompted attempts of countries to arrange cooperation to cope with all possible kinds of natural disasters. Natural disasters accounts for its importance in international relations today and is considered to be a global problem that ultimately requires global solutions. This is true to the level of regional cooperation for countries in ASEAN. With the regional problems of natural disasters being faced by the countries in this region, fundamental regimes and requirements for regional environmental governance are of crucial concerns. However, actions and policies in each ASEAN country remains a vital aspect of responses to the natural disasters. Yet, in a number of cases that the disasters do not spread across the national borders to other countries in ASEAN, international cooperation to assist the member countries have to be maintained and improve to ensure the collective prosperity and stability of ASEAN mandates. To cope with the downsides of international environmental politics, it is crucial for ASEAN to seek norms for capacity building for all ASEAN nations in terms of disaster management. International cooperation establishes governance regimes to regulate trans-boundary environmental issues in which could lead to the conflicts among countries [10].

**IV. CONCLUSION**

The response requirements of disaster management compose of more than one country and their management capabilities are tremendously accounted for their
accomplishment in coping with the devastating results of the natural disasters. It is important to address that the governments of the affected countries call on the resources of the international community [11]. In order to analyze the possibilities and limitations of all mentioned agencies to accomplish the theme of disaster management of ASEAN, ASEAN policies and national policies of Thailand are considered since they are important to guidelines for the implementations of the disaster management action plans. In addition, to achieve the effective disaster management and prompted emergency response, adequate practices and well-planned strategies are required. Prevailing political and economic circumstances both in Thailand and other ASEAN countries and regional relations among ASEAN countries are also crucial for an analysis on possibilities of international cooperation for effective disaster management theme; mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery.

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References