China's Pledge to Restore Blue Skies

By Lina Gong

Synopsis

The Chinese government declared a war to restore blue skies during the annual meeting of the National People's Congress (NPC), China's legislature, in March 2017. The increasing attention to air pollution by China's leadership underscores the urgency of and the difficulty in addressing environmental issues, which is also shared by ASEAN countries.

Commentary

ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION now poses a major non-traditional security (NTS) challenge to the Chinese society, and smog is the most visible among the environmental hazards confronting China. In a government work report to the annual meeting of the NPC earlier this month, Chinese premier Li Keqiang reaffirmed the government's resolution and commitment to address air pollution as well as other environmental concerns.

Repeated emphasis on environmental issues by the leadership reflects the recognition of the urgency of this problem to China. Despite the strengthened efforts to curb pollution however, incidents of heavy pollution still recur. In December 2016 alone, over 20 cities in northern China were affected by three waves of severe smoggy days, with the first-ever red alert of heavy air pollution issued. The persistence of heavy smog calls for a drastic change in approach to address the environmental challenges.

Non-Traditional Security – A Priority for China

Beijing began to recognise the importance of NTS issues in the late 1990s when witnessing the security implications of the Asian financial crisis in 1997 for Southeast

Asian countries. This understanding was reinforced by a string of non-military emergencies, like the outbreak of the SARS epidemic in 2003 and the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008.

The incumbent leadership now conceive of national security beyond the traditional military dimension but also include agendas like economic security, resource security and ecological security. This trend is reflected in the incorporation of the ecological dimension into the strategy of national development unveiled in 2012, which emphasises balanced and sustainable development.

Security Implications of Air Pollution

The elevation of NTS issues in China's national strategy indicates that the country faces mounting challenges from such problems, among which air pollution receives the widest attention due to its visibility and wide coverage in China. Health effects are the most worrying consequence of heavy smog. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), outdoor air pollution is responsible for diseases that lead to premature deaths, which include ischaemic heart disease, stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), lung cancer and acute lower respiratory infections in children.

The Health Effects Institute that maintains research on the health effects of air pollution across the globe estimates that fine particulates contributed to over one million deaths in 2015 in China, accounting for one fourth of the global total.

The widespread air pollution has economic consequences. A report of the World Bank pointed out that acid rain that is attributable to sulphur dioxide pollution cost over four billion US dollars of losses in China's agricultural sector. Air pollution-associated health problems impose heavy burdens on the country's welfare system, the cost of which was equivalent to almost ten per cent of China's GDP in 2013.

Other effects on economic development include shortened working life expectancy, emigration of talents and decline of inbound tourists. Moreover, negative impacts of air pollution on people's well-beings constitute a risk factor of social stability, with pollution accounting for over half of mass protests in China in recent years.

Problems that threaten the existence of a country and its people are considered security threats. As demonstrated above, heavy air pollution damages the environment that the Chinese people depend on, endangers public health security, and affects economic development in China. It is thus a pressing threat to national security and poses a challenge to the legitimacy of the government.

Integrated Response

To respond to and control air pollution, the central and local governments in China have put in place a set of expedient measures and institutionalised mechanisms. The central government launched the Air Pollution Prevention and Control Action Plan in 2013 and amended the Environmental Protection Law in 2014, which provide guidance and a legal basis for responses to air pollution.

The Ministry of Environmental Protection carried out restructuring in 2016 to cope with the environmental concerns in China in a more focused way. The Beijing Municipal government set up a comprehensive emergency response system that deal with a variety of public emergencies and involve coordination among different government agencies.

To tackle air pollution, it is essential to limit emissions of pollutants, optimise energy use and upgrade technologies. Measures to achieve these goals include replacing vehicles and machineries that do not meet the emissions standards, transforming industrial production, and promoting clean energy sources. These measures can cause inconveniences, discontent and tensions.

For provinces like Shanxi and Hebei whose economic pillars are polluting industries, economic transformation is likely to affect their GDP performance at least in the short term. Clean environment however hinges on all stakeholders fulfilling their responsibilities, not just the governments but also enterprises and individuals.

Way Forward

In view of China's rising status in the international arena, its war on air pollution is of significance for global governance of NTS issues, from climate change and environmental security to public health and energy security, as the country is the world's largest greenhouse gas emitter and energy consumer.

The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) supports China's effort by adopting a decision in February 2013 to promote 'ecological civilisation' which was introduced by China in 2007 that strives for a harmonious relationship between human activities and the ecosystem.

While measures unveiled by the Chinese premier represent a state-centric and top-down approach, other societal actors like NGOs are making increasing contributions to this cause, like pushing for transparency in governance; engaging in policymaking by providing ground information and data; and increasing public awareness about self-protection against pollution and green lifestyle. China's ongoing efforts in addressing these inter-related NTS challenges are not only important but also instructive for developing ASEAN countries which are rapidly undergoing industrialisation and urbanisation.

Lina Gong is a Research Fellow with the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.