The Case for an ASEAN Special Envoy for Climate

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In mid-September, while organising the 2024 ASEAN Leadership and Partnership Forum (ALPF) at the sidelines of the ASEAN Economic Ministers (AEM) Meeting as part of the KSI Strategic Institute for Asia Pacific team, I had an experience that brought the urgency of climate action into sharp focus. After a productive day of discussions, I took a walk through Vientiane Night Market with a colleague, eager to immerse myself in the local atmosphere. However, what awaited us was a stark reminder of the immediate impacts of climate change.

The Mekong River, swollen by Typhoon Yagi, had flooded parts of the market. Stalls and attractions, including a ferris wheel, were submerged, while a barely visible lightning pole continued flickering above the waterline. Locals stood at the river's edge, examining the extent of the damage. It was a visceral reminder that climate change is not a distant threat: it is happening now, affecting lives and livelihoods across ASEAN.

This idea was further solidified as I moderated a panel at the ALPF titled "Energy Transition and Shaping the Asia Pacific and ASEAN." One of the panellists, Mr. Albert Oung, President of the World Green Organisation and Co-Chairman of the ASEAN Economic Club, introduced the concept of the Asia Pacific Green New Deal, also known as the ASEAN Green Deal. This discussion inspired the idea for a dedicated ASEAN Climate Envoy, someone who could champion regional and global climate efforts.

A Comprehensive Role to Champion Climate Action

While the ASEAN Green Deal provides a roadmap for regional sustainability, the proposed ASEAN Climate Envoy must take on a broader mandate, similar to climate envoys in other regions. This envoy would engage in global diplomacy, representing ASEAN in critical climate negotiations and ensuring that regional interests are protected and advanced.

Global Engagement and Multilateral Support

Drawing inspiration from existing roles like the U.S. Climate Envoy and the EU's Climate Commissioner, the ASEAN Climate Envoy would be pivotal in securing ASEAN's place at international climate discussions, particularly in platforms such as the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The envoy would engage in diplomacy with major global players, ensuring ASEAN's voice is heard on issues like climate financing, emissions reductions, and green technology transfer.

Much like the **ASEAN Tech Ambassador** concept I proposed in an article a few months ago, this climate envoy role would ensure that ASEAN not only reacts to global trends but also helps shape them. By building alliances with key global actors and leveraging ASEAN's unique position, the envoy would play a critical role in advancing the region's climate goals.

Regional Leadership: The ASEAN Green Deal and Beyond

Regionally, the envoy would champion the ASEAN Green Deal, advocating for policies that prioritise renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and the protection of biodiversity. Through collaboration with ASEAN's various climate frameworks, such as the ASEAN Climate Change Initiative (ACCI), the envoy would ensure that member states' policies align with regional goals, fostering consistency in the adoption of sustainable practices.

The envoy would also lead efforts to secure climate financing for ASEAN member states, particularly those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. By acting as a liaison between ASEAN governments and international financial institutions, the envoy could ensure that countries have access to the necessary resources to build climate resilience.

Promoting Green Innovation and Economic Growth

Beyond policy and diplomacy, the ASEAN Climate Envoy would actively promote investment in green technologies and innovation. Southeast Asia has the potential to be a leader in sectors like renewable energy, electric vehicles, and sustainable infrastructure. The envoy's role would include fostering partnerships between the private sector, international investors, and ASEAN governments to unlock the economic potential of green growth.

By positioning ASEAN as a hub for green technology and sustainable development, the envoy would not only address the region's environmental challenges but also create new economic opportunities. This includes attracting foreign direct investment, supporting public-private partnerships, and advocating for green initiatives at the global level.

Learning from Global Best Practices

The creation of such an envoy in ASEAN would mirror the successful models seen in other regions. For instance, the European Union's Climate Commissioner has been instrumental in implementing the EU Green Deal, which aims for the EU to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. Similarly, the former U.S. Special Envoy for Climate John Kerry has played a key role in re-establishing the U.S.'s global leadership in climate diplomacy, particularly by re-entering the Paris Agreement.

China's Special Climate Envoy has also been critical in building international partnerships, particularly with developing nations, to advance climate goals despite China being the world's largest emitter. The ASEAN Climate Envoy could build upon these successes by tailoring global best practices to the specific needs and opportunities within Southeast Asia.

The ASEAN Climate Envoy: A Catalyst for Regional and Global Leadership

ASEAN's existing frameworks, like the ASEAN Climate Change Initiative, have laid the groundwork for regional cooperation on climate issues. But to fully harness ASEAN's potential and position the region as a global leader in sustainability, a Special Envoy for Climate is essential. This role would provide the leadership needed to bridge the gap between policy and action, ensuring that the ASEAN Green Deal and broader climate goals are realised.

The envoy's efforts would extend beyond ASEAN, making the region a proactive player in shaping global climate policies. By engaging in multilateral platforms like COP and securing international climate finance, the ASEAN Climate Envoy would ensure that Southeast Asia remains at the forefront of the global climate conversation.

As I reflect on the submerged markets of Vientiane and the urgency of our situation, it is clear that ASEAN must act now. The creation of an ASEAN Climate Envoy would be the first step toward a future where economic growth and environmental sustainability go hand in hand: ensuring a resilient, green future for all of Southeast Asia.