

27.1.2025 Helsinki, Ulkoministeriö (Sorsimo, Rautavaara, Turunen) ja SYKE (Häkkinen)

ASEAN –IPR Discussion Series 2024
Fostering Water Diplomacy: Advancing ASEAN's Regional Water Security Agenda

Thursday 23 January 2024, 14.00 - 16.30 at ASEAN Hall and online

Speakers (in order):

- H.E. Gusti Agung Wesaka Puja, Executive Director of ASEAN-IPR
- H.E. Vicky Singmin, Ambassador of Canada to ASEAN
- H.E. Retno L. P. Marsudi
- **Mr. Antti Rautavaara, Special Envoy for Water, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland**
- Mr. Chau Tran Vinh, Director of the Department of Water Resources Management Viet Nam
- Dr. Surasri Kidtimonton, MRC Joint Committee Chairperson

Background:

The principles of Water Diplomacy offer comprehensive strategies and methods to address specific situations in shared watercourses and mitigate potential disputes through facilitating the political processes and practices of developing joint water governance by applying foreign policy means that extend beyond the water sector and water-centric agreements and norms.

The UN 2023 Water Conference underscored that water diplomacy is essential for fostering peace and ensuring water security, making cooperation in this area vital for crisis prevention, climate resilience enhancement, and the advancement of sustainable development. The Conference also called for the need to enhance water diplomacy through strengthening capacity at all levels and by addressing the complexities and interconnections between water and other sectoral issues

This session of the Discussion Series aims to explore and identify the concept and practice of water diplomacy as a means for tension and disputes prevention and mitigation in shared water resources, thereby promoting water security in the Southeast Asia region. Furthermore, the cooperation and consensus-building among ASEAN states, referred to as the “ASEAN Way,” may enhance water diplomacy practices across multiple diplomacy tracks and levels, involving non-traditional state actors to contribute to the water security agenda.

SPEAKING POINTS (for 15-20 minutes):

- Honourable Retno L P Marsudi, speakers and guests, ladies and gentlemen.

UN Special Envoy on Water Retno Marsudi

- Your Excellency Retno Marsudi, we were delighted to learn that UN Secretary-General Guterres nominated You, as the very first *UN Special Envoy on Water*. Your nomination was long awaited by many UN Member States since we agreed on establishment of this position at the UN Water Conference in March 2023.
- We in Finland are truly delighted that this important position has now been fulfilled with such an experienced and respected high-level professional and diplomat as Yourself. Especially, as You are coming from ASEAN region and from one of the key leading international water affairs countries; Indonesia.
- Your excellency, please trust that Finland is at your disposal and ready to support You in the path towards the upcoming UN Water Conferences.

Tumen River Commission

- On personal note, I am pleased to be back at the ASEAN Headquarters here in Jakarta. Some 22 years ago, as a young water professional, I had a pleasure to visit here to learn from ASEAN experience, as back then, I was an environmental officer with UNDP and based at the Tumen River Commission in Beijing. Tumen River Commission was an organization for five Northeast Asian countries. So it has been a while, but I am pleased and honored to be invited here to speak.

Finland

- We in Finland have a long history of supporting the global water architecture to come together.
- We trust that *UN Special Envoy on Water* can play a critical role in drawing political attention to water affairs and cooperation in the coming years, as we approach the end of Agenda2030 and look forward to a new era where water

shall continue to be a critical element of life and human rights, and also increasingly of peace and security.

- We would also like to take the opportunity to commend Indonesia for the remarkable work in advancing the water agenda: recently, the *10th World Water Forum* in Bali was an extraordinary example of your commitment.
- It is important that countries like Indonesia and others take active role in promoting water diplomacy and seek to foster conversations between governments and/or fighting parties.

Setting the Scene:

- As we all know there is no life nor ecosystems without water. Water is the cornerstone of food security and energy security, and the foundation of human rights, health and dignity.
- Yet, we are at a crossroads. Globally, 2 billion people still lack access to safe drinking water, and over half of the world's population faces water scarcity for at least part of the year.
- Megatrends, such as climate change, population growth, and increasing industrial demands are intensifying this crisis, as well as land grabbing across continents and related agricultural product flows, or more precisely virtual water flows, between continents, which are threatening to increase inequalities and spark conflicts over shared water resources.
- This also with acknowledgment that 60% of freshwater flows are in shared basins and more than 40% of the world population lives in such basins.
- At times, countries are securing their access to water in a balanced and equitable manner through agreements, with true and honest respect to global water conventions and related principles, such as (i) principle of reasonable and equitable utilization as well as (ii) principle of cooperation.
- In less positive cases, countries are securing their interests through unilateral actions, quite typically if one is located upstream at the basin. Fortunately, and this is shown by evidence, transboundary waters have tended to be, at least so far, a source of cooperation rather than conflict.

- Increasing amount of strategic interests around natural resources are in play by nation states, and within states also different armed forces and groups are active. One example of such situation is the current turmoil and armed conflict, if not civil war, in Sudan.
- In Sudan, the most topical issue right now is to secure safe operation of existing dams, specifically Jebel Aulia dam on White Nile, just few kilometres upstream from Khartoum. Fighting parties must negotiate and secure dams as “critical infrastructure” needed for food and energy security. Acting on this would be prime example of fostering water diplomacy as part of active peace negotiation track.
- This also illustrates how global foreign and security policy horizon is changing rapidly. Especially, in the recent years, water has become increasingly used as a target or weapon of war, as has been the case in the *Russian aggression to Ukraine*, as well as in Gaza. In Ukraine water has become a weapon, but also a victim, at the Kakhovka dam explosion with it’s related environmental consequences.
- We are living what appears to be the sunset of globalization, and are moving towards a polarized world order. At the same time, in order to respond to the water crisis, we need more than ever cooperation in transboundary waters. This is why water diplomacy is needed.
- Another topic that has not received required attention is the Qosh Tepa canal which shall divert major part of River Amur Darya flow for it’s own agricultural needs, while likely leaving downstream Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan with steeply depleting flow in Amur Darya.
- Noteworthy issue is that this looming dispute does also have implications on global geopolitical scenery, as in the region there are also geopolitical interests to be looked after by such powers as China, Russia and US. I am trustful that in this context, major conflict maybe be averted with proactive Water Diplomacy, as preventive peace mediation.

Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (IPR)

- Worth also mentioning that Finland of course has a special relationship with Indonesia and with ASEAN *Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (IPR)*. Our late President Martti Ahtisaari, a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, was centrally

made available for Aceh peace negotiation, which led to signing of peace agreement on 15 of August 2005 in Helsinki. So soon enough... 20 years ago.

- Those signatures lifted the long shade of war from Aceh, and was a result of eight months of negotiation between parties.
- One of the significant learnings from those negotiations was that “*nothing is agreed until everything is agreed*”. This principle explains clearly, why there is a need to *foster Water Diplomacy* as part of different peace negotiations.
- It is hard to imagine sustainable peace in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan or anywhere else without also addressing different transboundary water issues, if nothing else, most often the borders are demarcated by rivers and other water bodies.
- If we look into Gaza, it is obviously clear that sustainable and positive peace can not be agreed without looking into sharing and caring of shared water resources in a region that is facing serious water scarcity issues.
- Some of this scarcity is also due to demarcation of borders during aftermaths of 1st World War in 1920s, as the Euphrates-Tigris basin was shared between winning-powers, leading to... well where we find ourselves today.
- In Ukraine, the watershed of River Dniester is covering roughly half of the Ukrainian territory, while the upstream is located in Belorussia and Russia. Any prospect for peace agreement needs to acknowledge these aspects as well as the infrastructure related issues, such as Kakhovka dam and it's reservoir, as means for water supply for Crimean Peninsula. In addition, the Zaporizzja nuclear power plant is physically located on the eastern banks of the Kakhovka reservoir.
- Apparently, these type of issues could be overlooked in power-based negotiations, but there the parties and international community may just be locking themselves into frozen conflict that with climate change may be “*gas-fired*” into full flames in any given moment in future.

Water Diplomacy and Transboundary Water Cooperation

- So the thematic of *Water, Peace and Security*, as well as *Water Diplomacy* are increasingly featuring in the global agenda and regional security and

cooperation structures, but what do we mean when we talk about *Water Diplomacy*?

- In Finland, by Aalto University, we have defined water diplomacy as a dynamic, politically-oriented process that aims to prevent, mitigate, and resolve water-related tensions in shared waters by making simultaneous use of diplomatic tools, water-related know-how and cooperation mechanisms across multiple diplomacy tracks.
- Diplomacy, that's what it is. With clear information and guidance from water and natural resources perspectives.
- It is important to remember that *Water Diplomacy* and *Transboundary Water Cooperation* are not synonyms. *Transboundary Water Cooperation* takes place when riparian countries have arrangement, agreement and/or institution for cooperation, like several ASEAN member countries have over Mekong River.
- Before riparian countries have such agreement in place, most often Water Diplomacy activities are needed by countries in question, supported by international community and regional institutions.
- The Trust is at the heart, and can be build and gained via multitude of different measures, most obvious *confidence building* measure being sharing of hydrological data and information between riparian countries.

Finland experience:

- Finland has long-standing experience in transboundary water cooperation with its neighbours (Sweden, Norway and Russia) as well as with other partnering countries, such as Namibia, we share experiences with them, we both learn from each other's.
- Bilateral cooperation with both Sweden and Norway is fluent and focuses on joint planning at a local scale.
- Finnish-Russian cooperation is based on post-2nd World War confidence-building and agreements, under which actual activities evolve with geopolitical changes. Notably we are upstream country vis a vis Russia, AND still we promote heavily transboundary water cooperation.

- Our experience with Russia shows, that even after 60 years of functional Transboundary Water Cooperation the countries may find themselves returning back to square one, due to changes in geopolitical situation.
- Note, square one, not square zero.

UN and UNECE Water Conventions

- Back in the 1960s, Finland was actively initiating global conventions on transboundary waters. So since the very beginning, Finland has been supporting the work of the Conventions, for example through awareness raising and in accelerating accession of new parties to the conventions.
- The two conventions complement each other's and especially UNECE Helsinki Water Convention, which, with its Secretariat, is lively and fast growing community of parties, with currently some 55 parties and almost 20 in accession process. Notably it is opened for global accession and we expect to see fast growing interest also from Asia in coming years.

ASEAN region:

- Also within ASEAN region water scarcity, intensifying variation in water availability, and inefficient usage, growing global challenges in the water sector, are becoming increasingly urgent issues.
- One example of this is the mighty Mekong River—a crucial lifeline for several ASEAN countries. In recent years, it has witnessed a significant changes in its flow, caused by shifts in rainfall patterns and the construction of dams upstream.
- These changes are not just a matter of environmental concern; it directly impacts agriculture, fisheries, and the livelihoods of millions of people who depend on the river for their survival.
- In light of these challenges, regional cooperation is not just important—it is essential. Transboundary water management requires us to work together, building collaborative frameworks that ensure fair and sustainable use of this precious resource.

- As a regional actor, ASEAN can continue to play a key role in facilitating dialogue and cooperation among its member states, promoting a unified approach to water security.

Fostering Water Diplomacy:

- In Finland, as said, we have understood water diplomacy as a politically led activity where water and natural resources know-how can assist foreign and security policy work, diplomacy itself.
- In order to foster water diplomacy, we noticed that there is always a need to build a strong knowledge base of the context. The aim of the background analysis is to understand better what are the relevant political, environmental, social, and economic dynamics of the context, and how to determine the needed water diplomacy actions.
- In order to address this need, we created a *Water Diplomacy Conflict Analysis* tool together with the *Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA)* and the *Finnish Environment Institute (FEI)*.
- This tool attempts to build up an adequate understanding of the operating environment in which water diplomatic efforts are to be designed and implemented.
- At the same time, it is a preventive and forward-looking tool, aiming at finding a menu of activities for us to use. In the analysis we combine natural resources (water) and foreign and security policy processes into one analysis.
- We have realized that this tool helps to utilize the established terminology of peace mediation - conflict analysis - but to apply it in the context of natural resources.
- After conducting a conflict analysis, the processes of water diplomacy can follow. It may be that we create a technical water negotiation path alongside of an actual peace negotiation track, or it could be that we in reality support the actual negotiation track with strategic or technical water thinking and know-how, enabling mediators and diplomats to see a wider horizon of possibilities. For example we could monitor dam reservoir water levels via remote sensing analytics.

- In general, water diplomacy processes aim at building trust between the parties in order to move away from political *Positions* towards dialogue on actual *Interests*. There are examples of trust-building around transboundary waters, where the shared waters can provide a unique context for negotiations.
- For example, emphasizing the shared benefits of the transboundary waters, focusing on data sharing or joint water monitoring, or generating institutional mechanisms. Also, joint fact-finding activities – why not also joint conflict analyses – can open a basis for trust.
- It is only in an environment of trust, where sustainable solutions can be found through diplomacy.

UNECE Helsinki Water Convention

- Few more words on UNECE Helsinki Water Convention.
- Transboundary water cooperation and the numerous tools and guidances developed under the UNECE Helsinki Water Convention can serve as basis for water diplomacy – and vice versa – Water Diplomacy may lead the parties into the collaborative space of Transboundary Water Cooperation.
- The convention has now over 55 parties. It has been opened to be global and there is much interest on it, particularly from Africa, but also from such countries as Iraq from Middle East and Panama from Central America.
- More than 20 countries are in the process of accession and 130 countries take part in meetings and activities. The Convention can thus be considered a success story of UN multilateralism.
- Finland has been co-leading the Programme of Work Area on Transboundary Water Allocation, a sensitive topic, and supported development of key technical guidance documents, such as the global Handbook on Water Allocation, as well as successful regional workshops in Central Asia and Southern Africa.
- Within Asia the Convention continues to actively grow its engagement and interest from countries. Just at the last Meeting of the Parties in October,

countries from ASEAN represented, included Thailand, Vietnam, Lao PDR, Indonesia and Malaysia.

- Finland, along with the secretariat, welcomes further increased engagement and participation in the Water Convention meetings by ASEAN countries.
- There is also a unique opportunity for any ASEAN country to become the first Party from Southeast Asia to join the Convention and receive recognition as a transboundary water cooperation leader.

Closing

- The need to foster and incorporate natural resources, and specifically water, into the processes of diplomacy is evident.
- It is a positive strong signal that ASEAN is organizing this event today.
- *Water Cooperation* was one of the thematic dialogues at the historic UN Water Conference in March 2023. We as Finland support having this topic once again and even more firmly on the UN Water Conference 2026 agenda as a thematic dialogue.
- Thank You