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ASEAN Centrality: Still Alive and Kicking

By Henrick Z. Tsjeng

Synopsis

ASEAN centrality has been challenged by the pulls of US-China tensions of late. Developments behind the scenes, and the recent United States-ASEAN Special Leaders' Summit at Sunnylands, however, demonstrate the continuing validity of the centrality dynamic.

Commentary

THE RECENT United States-ASEAN Special Leaders' Summit at Sunnylands, California, was hailed for consolidating the US rebalance to Asia. The Joint Statement of the Summit reiterated major principles to guide the trajectory of the US-ASEAN relationship and upheld the validity of ASEAN centrality in the evolving regional architecture of the Asia-Pacific. Amid concerns that ASEAN centrality is being undermined by major power politics, the Sunnylands Summit is an affirmation of its continuing strength rather than a sign of its weakness.

ASEAN centrality, the principle by which ASEAN countries maintain their leadership role in the regional architecture, envisions that the 10-member grouping can and should engage with extra regional powers, while always upholding ASEAN interests, and never allowing external powers to push their own agendas in the region.

Challenges to ASEAN Centrality from Cambodia to Malaysia

The notion of ASEAN centrality has been challenged in recent times, as ASEAN seems to be increasingly pulled in different directions by major power rivalry, especially between the United States and China. This appears evident in the South China Sea disputes, which has more than once posed challenges to the solidarity

and centrality of ASEAN. Many observers are increasingly pessimistic of the ability of ASEAN to hold together as a regional group and to continue playing the leading role in regional cooperation. However, such pessimism is for most part unwarranted, for now at least.

Such doubt is based on the appearance of ASEAN solidarity, on whether a joint declaration is issued or not, and failed to take into account the progress made in many aspects of cooperation in ASEAN. This doubt largely began when the 2012 ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in Cambodia failed to issue a joint communique for the first time in ASEAN's history.

That outcome was attributed to the influence of China on the then ASEAN Chair, Cambodia, not to include any reference to the South China Sea dispute in the joint communique. That was seen as a major political setback for ASEAN solidarity, though it was redeemed by a subsequent statement of principles on the South China Sea issued by the ASEAN foreign ministers.

What was not perceived was the continuance of regional defence cooperation, which grew at a steady pace. Defence initiatives under the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM), such as the ASEAN Defence Interaction Programmes and the Logistics Support Framework, continued apace. Ultimately, the incident in Cambodia was an aberration and did not affect ASEAN-led cooperation in other areas; ASEAN unity was not severely compromised.

Nonetheless, even defence cooperation did not appear immune from the vagaries of major power politics. In recent years, the US has been more active in pushing ASEAN as a grouping to be more forthright on the South China Sea issue, even as China firmly insists that the disputes, seen as bilateral issues, have no place in ASEAN-level dialogues. This was the case during the 3rd ADMM-Plus in Kuala Lumpur in November 2015, which issued no joint declaration.

Unfounded fears

In the wake of that meeting, many observers feared that ASEAN was losing its centrality. While there are reasons to be concerned about the increasing prominence of major power rivalry, these sentiments, however, failed to grasp the strength of ASEAN unity as it worked behind the scenes.

For example, the ADMM Retreat, held one day before the 3rd ADMM-Plus, yielded an important outcome – the agreement to set up the Direct Communication Link initiative, which would enhance response coordination during an emergency situation. This was a milestone that was achieved with little fanfare, owing to the relatively higher profile of the non-issuance of a joint declaration the following day.

Moreover, given the likely disagreement between the US, China and other countries over the inclusion of the South China Sea issue, ASEAN countries had in fact demonstrated their unity and centrality in the 3rd ADMM-Plus by not issuing a joint declaration that would have included the issue. Instead, the Malaysian Chair released a Chairman's Statement—which did not require the consensus of all

parties—that mentioned the Declaration of the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, as well as the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

The Sunnylands Summit: ASEAN Centrality Affirmed

The Sunnylands Summit accorded the US host an opportunity to push its agenda onto ASEAN, yet, it did not get any explicit mention of the South China Sea into the Joint Statement. While the fifth paragraph of the Joint Statement expressed support for ASEAN centrality, the following four paragraphs in fact played out that centrality: much was mentioned about the importance of peaceful resolution of disputes as well as adherence to international law; but the South China Sea disputes in and of themselves were not even mentioned, although they were implicit in these four paragraphs.

It is likely that the US is growing increasingly supportive of ASEAN centrality and has, at least for now, backed off from pushing its agenda on the South China Sea disputes in the discussions.

This is ASEAN centrality at work, which emphasises that great power politics should not hijack ASEAN's agenda while ASEAN continues to lead the agenda in its external engagement. That is not to say that ASEAN is sweeping the South China Sea problem “under the rug”, a criticism constantly levelled at the group; the Sunnylands Joint Statement emphasised maritime security and called for adherence to the Law of the Sea and the safeguarding of freedom of navigation and overflight – all-encompassing values that both ASEAN and the US are able to agree on regarding the South China Sea disputes.

Even though ASEAN centrality may have been challenged by major power rivalry in recent times, much progress on cooperation, both within ASEAN and with dialogue partners, has taken place. To simply harp on the apparent divisions within ASEAN arising from lack of joint declarations, is to paint a distorted picture of the ASEAN centrality dynamic. Nonetheless, ASEAN must continue to make sure that it speaks with a unified voice and expands the scope of its cooperation, so as not lose its solidarity, relevance, and centrality.

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