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ASEAN Centrality: A Bridge Too Far?

By Lawrence Anderson

SYNOPSIS

Great power divisiveness is being generated outside the Southeast Asian region. ASEAN needs to rethink its assumptions, but it has many valuable elements in place. Great powers need to see the value of a non-partisan ASEAN, akin to a 'bridge' between their rival spheres, as essential for peace.

COMMENTARY

THREE MONTHS into the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the conflict looks nowhere near being resolved. Instead, the repercussions of the war in Europe have lapped onto Asia's shores. Within ASEAN, it has polarised member states into opposing groups: one, prepared to condemn Russia's invasion and call it 'war'; the other, sympathetic to Russia's claim that it has undertaken only a 'special military operation' against Ukraine, and that the West is to blame because it did not consider Russia's security concerns. Unless its members are prepared to address these polarizing differences, ASEAN risks being divided further.

While Russia's war in Ukraine has captured the headlines, China remains the United States' most important long-term challenge. Coupled with China's close alignment with Russia, the war has added another dimension to the prevailing US-China strategic competition in Southeast Asia. ASEAN can expect to face intense pressure from both sides as it convenes its Dialogue Partner meetings throughout the year. This will lead invariably to questions about the continued validity and usefulness of ASEAN's regional security institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS).

ASEAN's Security Architecture Revisited

The absence of a regional security forum in Asia in the 1990s enabled the ARF to fulfil a useful role by providing a neutral ground for members to get to know each other better, to meet privately at the side-lines for confidential talks and to build up trust and confidence. The ARF in Brunei in 1995 enabled Secretary of State Warren Christopher to meet Chinese counterpart Qian Qichen privately under the cover of both having to attend the meeting. Similarly, at the Bangkok ARF in 1999, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was able to have a bilateral discussion with her North Korean counterpart.

Where ASEAN and the other security fora members have failed is in devising further mechanisms to manage their differences and great power rivalries more effectively. This is the stark scenario facing the region today under the guise of a resurgent China/Russia partnership confronting a more determined US and its western/Asian allies not prepared to concede further ground.

With decision-making in the ARF hampered by the need for consensus, it is too easy for each side to stymie progress on initiatives that they deem are targeted against them, leaving the logical next step – formation of alternative groupings like QUAD and AUKUS, and the deepening Russia-China partnership – to fill the void.

The ARF and EAS are not alliances, and they still have a role to play in managing the peace. Their utility continues to be a neutral platform for members to interact and build trust.

Having ARF members subscribe to principles enshrined in the UN Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) – respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, the independence of states and the peaceful settlement of disputes – are important and necessary conditions, but they are not sufficient to keep the peace and resolve conflicts.

ASEAN, as driver of these regional institutions, must find ways and means to reinvigorate them to maintain its Centrality. For instance, it must persuade all parties to look seriously at what continues to be relevant and what needs to change, whether in terms of structures, practices, or mindsets.

Relevant Practices, New Ideas

The main value of the ARF and EAS nowadays could be to try to prevent conflicts from breaking out or invasions from taking place. Through private meetings on the side-lines, whether in bilateral or small groups, leaders and ministers from the major powers can obtain alternative and, at times, frank viewpoints offering a fresh perspective of regional developments different from what might be presented by their respective advisers.

Will this be sufficient to deter countries from forging alliances? Probably not, but they could serve as part of an overlapping network of security mechanisms between diplomacy and war. The challenge is to make sure they are effective and not serve as talk-shops or unhelpful occasions for each side to hurl accusations and insults at one another. What is needed is a 'bridge' to span the widening chasm between the warring parties.

A Bridge Over Troubled Waters

From the perspective of Cold War realists, Asia today is divided into two rival spheres of influence under two dominant hegemonies, namely China/Russia and the US, each with their friends and allies. The two groupings stand almost toe-to-toe with countries in both camps trying to maintain a semblance of good relations with the hegemonies.

However, as both sides jockey to win more friends and allies, it increases the risk of clashes taking place, whether by accident or design. What is sorely needed is recognition by both hegemonies that conflict between them is costly and that it would be sensible to have some distance between their respective spheres. As we live in an inter-dependent, connected world, it is evident that peaceful relations and competition between them will be of paramount importance. This could be facilitated by ASEAN and its related fora in the form of a 'bridge'.

ASEAN provides neutral platforms for major powers and regional states, effectively the 'political and security space' to engage one another. In addition, ASEAN can offer 'economic space' by being a relevant testbed for the major powers to build stronger economic linkages with individual ASEAN countries, short of being forced to choose between the two spheres.

ASEAN's value then is to be a neutral, reliable 'bridge' for the hegemonies to co-exist at the very least, and to build towards cooperation, instead of focusing on strategic competition. In short, to work towards strengthening the bridge rather than competing to pull the bridge into their respective orbits, thereby threatening the collapse of the structure itself.

Bridge Between Two Spheres

We want to strive towards balanced, effective, and sustainable security mechanisms for Asia. The EAS and ARF can contribute significantly to that goal if both superpowers see ASEAN not as countries to pull into their respective spheres of influence, but as a bridge affording a useful and safe relevant space between their two spheres. This means having ASEAN neutral, but close friends to both powers. It requires a mindset change by both major powers and their allies, as well as within ASEAN itself, thereby injecting a meaningful relevance to the concept of ASEAN centrality.

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