

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Renewing Southeast Asia's Conflict Management Capacity

By Marty Natalegawa

SYNOPSIS

Ever widening and deepening geopolitical frictions that may jeopardise peace in the Asia-Pacific region are only one of the many challenges facing ASEAN. Concurrently, ASEAN is facing challenges "internal" to the region, namely the situation in Myanmar and the South China Sea. These are testing ASEAN's relevance and capacity to manage the region's security commons.

COMMENTARY

A highly complex "external" environment continues to confront ASEAN. Ever widening and deepening geopolitical competition, beyond the well-defined China-US dynamics and extending beyond political-security domains into other fields, not only tests ASEAN's unity and relevance, but also risks seriously jeopardising the decades-long peace dividend the Asia-Pacific region has enjoyed. Trust-deficit among nations and potential hotspots permeate, such that ASEAN faces an *arc of instability* beyond its region.

ASEAN has not yet formulated concrete responses to these geopolitical competitions, beyond expressions of concern and appeals not to be forced to choose. Actions to promote strategic stability or "[dynamic equilibrium](#)" (a concept proposed by the author), despite the worsening competition between geopolitical rivals, are needed. In essence, amidst the geopolitical turbulence, ASEAN needs to manifest its centrality or relevance by projecting its role in helping promote strategic stability.

Internal tests

Concurrently, at least two issues "internal" to Southeast Asia, namely the situation in Myanmar and the South China Sea, are once again testing ASEAN's capacity to

manage the region's commons. Decades-long ASEAN "scripts" on these issues – to support Myanmar's transition to democracy and to manage the potentials for conflict in the South China Sea – appear fraying as developments on the ground outpace ASEAN's efforts. Increasingly, a sense of ASEAN's policy drift and weakening common purpose are discernible.

In Myanmar, the prospect of an inclusive and durable political settlement – the restoration of democracy – seems as distant as ever. The ever-changing condition on the ground constantly alters the incentives of the conflicting sides to engage in dialogue. Meanwhile, the indescribable sufferings of the people of Myanmar continue unabated and regional spillover of the conflict is no longer a prospect but becoming a reality.

In the South China Sea, the prospect of an incident between claimant states escalating to open conflict has heightened. As ASEAN continues its complex negotiations with China on the Code of Conduct and regularly issues statements on the South China Sea post-summits and ministerial meetings, "out of ASEAN" approaches on addressing the issue are evident, including the trilateral process involving Japan, the Philippines, and the United States.

ASEAN cannot afford to be absent and resigned to repeating often-cited positions or efforts, such as the Five Points of Consensus on Myanmar and the negotiations on the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea, while the situation on the ground reach new low levels.

Southeast Asia's record in dealing with regional conflicts

Much like developments and dynamics external to the region, ASEAN cannot "opt-out" of these regional developments. They constitute litmus tests of ASEAN's relevance and impact. A peaceful, stable and prosperous Southeast Asia – an ASEAN Community – will remain fragile and tenuous so long as these issues continue to fester unattended. This is precisely why ASEAN – decades past and despite detractors – chose not to shy away from managing the complex dynamics in Myanmar and South China Sea. Of course, much like the past, there are voices and views today that once again rein in ASEAN's activism, with suggestions that ASEAN is not equipped to deal with such situations.

Yet, Southeast Asia possesses considerable body of state practice, formal as well as informal, and some more successful than others, on managing conflicts situations. The Jakarta Informal Meetings on the Cambodian conflicts in the late 1980s that enabled the attainment of the Comprehensive Cambodian Peace Agreement in 1991; the informal South China Sea Workshop process that paved the way for the formal ASEAN-China process on the South China Sea; the bilateral agreements between Indonesia and Malaysia and also between Malaysia and Singapore to refer their territorial disputes to the ICJ; the Philippines engagement of regional neighbours, Indonesia and Malaysia in particular, to assist in facilitating talks with the MNLF and MILF in the southern part of the country that led to peace agreements between all the sides; the on-and-off informal efforts to manage conditions in the southern Thailand; Indonesia's deliberate efforts to include its neighbours to help observe the agreement with the so-called free Aceh movement in the Aceh province; Indonesia's requests that

its neighbours be part of the UN operations in East Timor post-separation; the decades-long bilateral management of the Malaysia-Philippines dispute over Sabah; the management of the border disputes between Cambodia and Thailand that nearly flared into open conflict in 2011; and the many years of adroit management of the complex dynamics in Myanmar that – until recent developments – helped ushered democratic change.

Clearly, there has not been a one-size-fits-all solution. Each of the situations cited above have had its own unique circumstances, and its management has involved deft combinations of approaches: national, bilateral, trilateral, regional, and indeed global, as well as formal and informal. Without doubt, however, the positive spirit ASEAN helped foster among Southeast Asian countries – the so-called ASEAN way or spirit – has been pivotal in helping promote conflict management, and not to allow issues to fester and potentially destabilise the region.

Indeed, at its most productive period of institution and capacity building – as part of ASEAN Community-building – ASEAN systematically build an impressive range of conflict management capacities. The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), the ASEAN Charter, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission for Human Rights, and scores of other ASEAN processes and commitments, suggest that ASEAN has impressive list of toolkits to deal with a wide range of conflict situations. All derived and build on the region's extensive experience.

Conclusion

In short, the wherewithal exists for sustained efforts to address the situation in Myanmar and the South China Sea. It is pertinent to raise the question why these have not been invoked and fully utilised, and to urgently place diplomacy and dialogue front and centre.

Past cases certainly indicate that a *sine qua non* for common regional efforts is highest political engagement by the leadership of the region. As the situation in Myanmar and the South China Sea festers, there is a case for renewed political impetus. That more of the same, a business-as-usual mindset, may not only seriously impair ASEAN's reputation to effectively manage the region's affairs, rather may also threaten the many decades of peace and stability that the region has enjoyed. ASEAN is called upon to actively seize the moment and deftly apply the myriad experiences the region possesses to manage the conflicts before it.

Dr Marty Natalegawa is a Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. He was the Foreign Minister of Indonesia (2009-14), and author of "Does ASEAN Matter? A View from Within" (ISEAS, 2018).
