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ASEAN and China: Navigating Turbulent Waters Ahead

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

The recent fracas in ASEAN over the South China Sea disputes is symptomatic of possible turbulence ahead for the regional organisation as it steers its relations with Asia's emergent power.

Commentary

ON THE 45th anniversary of ASEAN, Indonesia's Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa expressed optimism that a regional code of conduct to govern behaviour in the South China Sea (SCS) would be ready by year end. In so doing, he signalled ASEAN's shift to a new and more active phase to resolve the territorial disputes in the SCS by pushing for an early adoption of the long-stalled Code of Conduct (CoC). Dr Natalegawa's confidence followed his success in securing an ASEAN consensus on a six-point statement of principles on the South China Sea in late July after it failed to issue a joint communique(JC) at the group's annual meeting in Phnom Penh.

The statement has papered over the rift within ASEAN between members who are disputants in the SCS and the ASEAN chair who refused to seek a compromise position, resulting in the non-issuance of a JC for the first time in ASEAN's 45 year-long history. Cambodia would need to focus on repairing the fissures in ASEAN so that it can host a credible Summit in November.

By shifting gear towards and early CoC, ASEAN is also repairing the rift over the territorial disputes between some of its members and China, the region's emergent power. This has prompted a more cooperative posture on Beijing's part. China's Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, on a visit to Jakarta on 10 August, pledged to build mutual trust towards the eventual adoption of the CoC.

Notwithstanding its common position, ASEAN will need to regain its unity of purpose to assert its direction. "You can only have an ASEAN that is central in the region if ASEAN itself is united and cohesive," said Dr Natalegawa. Unity is crucial for ASEAN to realise its larger goal of an ASEAN Community in 2015 while a united ASEAN is essential for its role as a central player in the evolving East Asian economic and security architecture.

ASEAN's Three Concerns

ASEAN, however, is not totally free of troubles as the region enters a period of great uncertainty. The Phnom Penh episode has exposed three concerns, first and foremost being an intra-ASEAN rupture.

For some time since the expansion of the group to ten in the late 1990s, there has been talk of a “two-tier ASEAN” developing. One is the core ASEAN comprising the original five founding members Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and Philippines plus Brunei which joined in 1984. The other is the new outer layer of ASEAN which comprises four Southeast Asian states that were once on the periphery of ASEAN - some even ideologically opposed - and were incorporated after the end of the Cold War. Collectively they are referred to as the CLMV countries - Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.

The incorporation of the CLMV states was prompted by the vision of ASEAN's founding fathers of a unified Southeast Asia. Some members were, however, concerned about too fast an expansion. Could the CLMV countries, being essentially socialist or central command states, fit into the norm, political culture and values of mainstream ASEAN? But the regional unifiers were persuasive and won the day.

Indeed, over the following decade, an expanded ASEAN made its mark on the wider region, paving the way for such initiatives as the ASEAN Plus 3 (China, Japan and South Korea). A unified Southeast Asia developed such confidence that ASEAN even pursued the ambitious diplomatic strategy of becoming central to the wider regional architecture, exemplified by the East Asia Summit.

Strains waiting to show

The expansion, however, came with strains. Firstly, Myanmar's inclusion, which upset ASEAN's Western partners, came at a cost to mainstream ASEAN. But the diplomatic dividend was a reforming Myanmar, albeit still fragile. Secondly, Cambodia is proving to be a difficult addition. Since ASEAN's founding, members have squabbled over bilateral disputes, but never had they resorted to a “shooting war”. For the first time in 2008, however, when Cambodia and Thailand clashed over a border dispute, shots were fired. The easy and unprecedented slide to armed conflict, harking back to historical animosities, was ominous. Is there a deeper problem between mainstream ASEAN and outlier ASEAN?

The second-tier, as initially feared, has brought in a new set of challenges. Some argue these are growing pains that should be accommodated. But the failure of the Phnom Penh meeting to issue a joint communiqué was reflective of the widening divide within. No core ASEAN member in the role of chair would have allowed the annual meeting to close without a joint communiqué – which is an important record of key decisions. A core ASEAN member would have resorted to some finessing of diplomatic language in the text to reflect common concerns. The ease with which the Cambodia chair tossed aside the joint communiqué is again reflective of a deeper problem: do the CLMV countries have the same commitment to ASEAN and all that it stands for?

ASEAN Community 2015?

The second concern is the impact of this fissure on the creation of the ASEAN Community 2015. This project is on the brink of falling apart. ASEAN Community 2015 now very much hinges on who will chair the group over the next three years. On record, they are Brunei, Myanmar and Malaysia in that order. Brunei and Malaysia are members of mainstream ASEAN; Myanmar is not. Indeed, Myanmar will be steering ASEAN at a sensitive moment in the group's evolution. Will Naypyidaw be the next to pull a shocker?

The third source of concern is China's growing intrusion into the foreign policy-making domain of ASEAN. It is clear that Beijing had leaned on Phnom Penh, a close ally, to influence the handling of the South China Sea disputes in ASEAN's joint communiqué. What China had done will only sharpen deep concerns within the region that its rise as an emergent power will be intrusive – even interventionist. The signs are that the road ahead for ASEAN-China relations will be as difficult as it will be potentially beneficial.

China has imposed its will on ASEAN without lifting a finger. All it had to do was whisper in the ear of a regional ally. Long a dormant source of tension, the South China Sea is proving to be the explosive flashpoint that many fear it is and ASEAN is sailing into potentially turbulent waters.

ASEAN's way forward

ASEAN watchers, nevertheless, point to some redeeming features in the ASEAN-China relationship that could calm the troubled waters. These are the growing multi-faceted relations between all ASEAN members and China, from economic and social to military and security. Some of the core ASEAN countries such as Malaysia

and Singapore, trade more with China than the outer tier countries. At the same time many of them have long-standing defence and security cooperation with the United States and other Western powers.

ASEAN as a whole has economic cooperation arrangements with regional countries like Australia, Japan and India to further balance China. For its part Beijing has a stake in the unity and cohesion of ASEAN to ensure that the region remains a friendly neighbourhood. These factors will underpin ASEAN's unity and solidarity as it meets the challenges of potential great power rivalry between China and the US in the Asia-Pacific region.

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