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ASEAN Centrality: Why it is important for US and China

By Sarah Teo

Synopsis

With the ongoing tensions over territorial disputes in Northeast and Southeast Asia, regionalism in East Asia seems to have taken a beating. Notwithstanding great power rivalry threatening to erode ASEAN unity, ASEAN centrality is important to both the US and China.

Commentary

REGIONAL COOPERATION in East Asia has suffered several setbacks recently. Since July, tensions in Northeast Asia have flared over long-running territorial disputes involving the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands. The latest spats have resulted in Seoul and Tokyo suspending a military exchange programme while fanning nationalist sentiments in China, Japan and South Korea. The United States has declared its neutrality in both disputes, although a State Department spokesperson acknowledged that the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands fell within the scope of the US-Japan Security Treaty.

Earlier in July the failure of ASEAN's foreign ministers to produce a joint communiqué at the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Phnom Penh owing to disagreement over the South China Sea disputes sparked considerable debate in the international community. Some experts observed that this was a reflection of China's expanding influence intruding into ASEAN's agenda.

Amid such tensions, concerns have emerged that ASEAN unity may erode as major powers tussle for regional influence. However, ASEAN centrality can be advantageous for both the US and China. This could motivate both powers to preserve ASEAN centrality even as they seem to find themselves at odds with each other in the midst of tenuous inter-state relations in the region.

For the US: managing the 'spokes'

Washington has repeatedly stressed that its bilateral alliances "remain the bedrock of [its] engagement in the region". Under the hub-and-spokes model, the US constructed a web of bilateral alliances with regional countries such as Japan, South Korea, Thailand and the Philippines. In the evolving international environment, the US has also recognised the importance of multilateral forums, even as its bilateral relationships remain central in its Asia policy.

One of the US' strategies for maintaining regional influence, vis-à-vis a rising China, has been to encourage

closer ties between its 'spokes'. The US has pushed for closer relations between Japan and South Korea, the two "lynchpins" of its security strategy in Asia. This task has often been disrupted by the historical and territorial disputes between Tokyo and Seoul. The US' calls for both allies to hold consultations on the latest dispute over the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands appear impossible to realise, as Seoul has rejected Japanese attempts to negotiate the sovereignty of the islands.

In the face of bilateral antagonism, multilateral channels such as ASEAN and its associated mechanisms could provide a platform for reducing tensions. This is even if the dispute is not on the official agenda of the talks. For example, on the sidelines of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) in October 2010, Beijing and Tokyo agreed to set up a liaison system for maritime conflicts, in the wake of a collision between Chinese and Japanese ships which saw bilateral relations plummet.

Given the informal and non-pressurising nature of such bilateral talks, Seoul and Tokyo could also reach a resolution on the sidelines of the next ASEAN meeting to manage their dispute. Furthermore, even if the Northeast Asian states are embroiled in disputes, cooperation via ASEAN-centred platforms ensures that dialogue among them continues. For the US, the value of ASEAN and its associated channels thus lie in the potential of advancing cooperation amid conflicts between its allies.

For China: managing threat perceptions

China's interest in multilateral forums is partly driven by its desire to manage perceptions of its military and economic rise. At meetings such as the East Asia Summit and the ADMM-Plus, Chinese officials have reiterated that China's rise is non-threatening, and stressed that China's security policy is defensive rather than offensive.

Only through engaging other states can China assure the region that it has no hostile intentions behind its "peaceful development" agenda. Furthermore, the ASEAN way of diplomacy, involving consensus-based decision-making and non-interference in the internal matters of member states, sits well with the direction of Chinese foreign policy.

China has declared support for ASEAN's centrality in East Asian regionalism, particularly when it involves non-traditional security issues. Premier Wen Jiabao has also called for "promot[ing] East Asia integration with [ASEAN] 10+3 as the main vehicle." Indeed, a rising China may find a united ASEAN useful in stabilising the external environment and quelling regional tensions.

It will not be in China's interest if ASEAN is no longer in the driver's seat of East Asian multilateralism. China needs a strong ASEAN to fulfil its own goals of calibrating perceptions of its rise and managing transnational issues. Likewise, the US requires ASEAN to remain a central platform in regional cooperation, so that an avenue exists to manage bilateral tensions between its Northeast Asian allies. Thus, despite emerging tensions within ASEAN, its centrality is unlikely to be in any danger of being eroded by great power rivalry in the foreseeable future.

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