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Beyond 50: ASEAN's Role in the Evolving Regional Order

By David Han & Shawn Ho

Synopsis

Given the flurry of activities surrounding ASEAN's commemoration of its 50th anniversary last month, it is now timely to take a step back, reflect on ASEAN's achievements and then look ahead to its future. Will the organisation's flexibility in meeting future geo-political, security, social, and economic challenges ensure its centrality in the evolving regional order?

Commentary

8 AUGUST this year marked a significant milestone for ASEAN as the Association entered its 50th year of existence. As Southeast Asia's, and to some degree the Asia-Pacific's, most viable multilateral institution, ASEAN has proven to be a cornerstone of peace and stability in the region for five decades. Since its founding in 1967, ASEAN has performed a multitude of roles. This ranged from promoting peaceful co-existence and cooperation between ASEAN neighbours to keeping out great power rivalry from the region.

It has played a central role from the expansion of the original five founding members to its current ten members, as well as the formation of an ASEAN Community to further economic integration. ASEAN has achieved these goals through its time tested ASEAN Way of consultation and consensus building mechanisms. As the regional order continues to evolve, the challenges to ASEAN will be diverse and complex. ASEAN's centrality and flexibility will enable it to cope with these emerging challenges if it can acknowledge its own weak spots and take early corrective measures.

ASEAN's Centrality

ASEAN centrality is probably the only constant in an evolving regional order. This term has been used to denote ASEAN in the driver's seat in the development of regionalism

in the Asia-Pacific. Such centrality enables ASEAN to be a neutral body that can convene annual institutionalised meetings which are of benefit to all the major powers in the region; all major countries have consistently reaffirmed the central role played by ASEAN in this region. Additionally, ASEAN's centrality does not permit any major power(s) to dictate the way regional agendas are shaped or steered.

Thus far, ASEAN has done well in providing numerous platforms for regional and extra-regional players to engage in dialogue and consensus building. Taken in this context, ASEAN centrality is not so much about leadership, but about ASEAN's ability to be the central magnet that brings in the great powers to discuss the critical issues of the day. A case in point would be the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) which remains the only ongoing multilateral setting where North Korea and other members of the stalled Six Party Talks (i.e., US, China, South Korea, Russia, Japan) are seated at the same table. The value of dialogue and multilateralism to manage disputes and reduce tensions has once again come to the fore following North Korea's 6th nuclear test yesterday and the ensuing diplomatic crisis.

However, if centrality implies ASEAN playing a major leadership role in shaping the regional order, then perhaps this is still an aspiration that has yet to be fulfilled due to certain key challenges. For instance, it is unclear if the major powers will allow ASEAN to actively shape the regional order although it was instrumental in creating the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) forum. This is especially uncertain given the numerous issues in which the major powers have a strong interest in managing by themselves.

Moreover, the Asia-Pacific regional order is undergoing complex changes that may be beyond the mandate and capability of ASEAN to play a leading role in. To navigate this uncertain future, ASEAN will need to be even more strategic in its thinking and adaptive in the years ahead.

ASEAN's Flexibility

ASEAN's centrality also needs to be coupled with flexibility. While ASEAN in its current shape and form is unable to resolve all disputes even within its own backyard, ASEAN has a large array of multilateral platforms that has been put to good use such as the ARF, APT, East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM), ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting (ADMM), ADMM-Plus.

These diplomatic platforms enable ASEAN to at least manage almost all kinds of disputes. While solving a dispute should be the ideal outcome, being able to manage it via the ASEAN Way at least prevents situations from spiralling out of control.

Looking ahead, there is much work that still needs to be done by ASEAN. Indeed, perhaps it is only when ASEAN becomes a united Community that ASEAN can take the next leap forward and potentially be seen as a prominent global leader such as the US, China or the EU should ASEAN wish to do so. If ASEAN wants to achieve this next step in its evolution, ASEAN needs to be forward looking, remain flexible and responsive to the inevitable shifts in the region's geo-political plates in the coming years and decades.

Onwards to ASEAN's 51st Birthday and Beyond

While this Golden Jubilee year was a celebratory occasion for ASEAN and relevant parties have so far avoided major contentious issues, such matters could resurface in the years ahead. Particularly, if the South China Sea disputes continue to sharply divide ASEAN member states and hinder the Association's ability to reach a consensus on this issue, questions will surely be asked whether ASEAN can continue to play a central role in the regional architecture.

Indeed, the rising Chinese assertiveness and the divisive nature of maritime disputes have been used by detractors to criticise ASEAN's lack of unity and inability to resolve such disputes.

That being said, ASEAN's toolkit goes well beyond trying to manage maritime disputes and great power politics. While the media's focus on such issues may make for sensationalised journalism, it fails to pay attention to other less discussed but equally important issues in the region. For example, ASEAN has, through the ADMM and ADMM-Plus, displayed greater unity and skill in dealing with non-traditional security (NTS) issues such as Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) and terrorism. To be fair to ASEAN, critics of ASEAN's centrality also need to assess ASEAN's performance in these areas that could affect regional peace.

While ASEAN is not perfect, it is the best option available in this region and there has yet to emerge a better alternative. Change is a constant and how ASEAN manages to adapt to meet any emerging challenges will determine whether ASEAN is able to scale greater heights in the years ahead.

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