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No. 144/2010 dated 9 November 2010

Big Power Rivalry in East Asia: Will it Disrupt Regional Cooperation?

By Tan Seng Chye

Synopsis

Big power rivalry has re-emerged in East Asia. ASEAN's centrality may be challenged as a result but should not be sidelined by this renewed rivalry. ASEAN has also to ensure that the agenda for East Asian cooperation remains on track.

Commentary

THE EAST ASIA Summit (EAS) held in Hanoi on 30 October 2010 issued a Chairman's statement which highlighted the substantial cooperation in EAS, as known as ASEAN + 6. This ranges from financial and economic to functional cooperation in areas like education, energy, environment, disaster management and avian influenza. The EAS also agreed on the proposed establishment of the EAS Trade Finance Network. There are ongoing negotiations for the Comprehensive Economic Partnership in East Asia (CEPEA) which will promote economic integration in East Asia. The EAS, complemented by the Asean+3 which includes China, Japan and South Korea, constitutes the evolving architecture for cooperation in East Asia.

Resurgent Big Power Rivalry

However there seems to be little publicity on the increasing and deepening cooperation in East Asia. The media focus has instead been on the territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the dispute between China and Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. There were heated exchanges between China and the United States, and China and Japan, on these two issues. These new disputes have arisen as the US is re-asserting its presence in East Asia through its "back in Asia" policy. There are opposing views between the US and China over their approaches to the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. In particular China opposed strongly the US' suggestion of a multilateral approach and US' intervention to help resolve these disputes.

China wants to negotiate with the few ASEAN claimants on a bilateral basis and on the basis of the ASEAN-China Declaration of the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and international law including the UN Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). ASEAN and China will be holding talks in December to discuss the establishment of a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea as provided for as a follow up to the DOC. As the territorial disputes have existed for a long time, it is unlikely that they will be resolved in the foreseeable future. In the meantime, however, joint exploitation of the resources by the claimants may be an option.

As for the dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, it is also a long-standing one. The recent US declaration that Senkaku came under the US-Japan Security Alliance has made the issue more complicated for resolution besides attracting a strong protest from China. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's proposal of a three-party meeting involving the US, China and Japan to discuss the dispute was rejected by China which considered this a bilateral issue. These exchanges have caught media attention and provoked unease in the region, particularly in ASEAN, over what appears to be a resurgence of big power rivalry in the area.

How will it affect East Asian Cooperation?

After the EAS meeting in Hanoi, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, visited the disputed Kurils/ Northern Territories Islands that lie between northern Japan and the eastern tip of the Russian Far East. Japan's opposition to the visit heightened tension between the two countries. Like the other disputes in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, the tension will likely escalate as the big powers hold strongly to their stances.

The differences between the US and China cover a wide range of bilateral issues. The US perceives a rising China and its growing economic and military power as posing a challenge to US primacy in East Asia. Consequently, the US wants to counter Chinese military power and China's good relations with or clout in Southeast Asia. This is well manifested in Washington's "back in Asia" policy. Another sign is the US recognition of ASEAN's centrality and its desire to enhance relations with ASEAN as indicated in the US-ASEAN Leaders Meeting joint statement

There was no mention of the South China Sea issue in the joint statement. This was also the case with the joint statement of the inaugural ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) and in the EAS Chairman's statement. The US wanted to impress on ASEAN that it recognised the sensitivity of this issue since Hillary Clinton raised it at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in July. However there was indirect discussion on the need to resolve territorial disputes through peaceful negotiations.

In the past the ASEAN-centric architectures like ASEAN+1, ASEAN+3, EAS, ARF and the ASEAN Dialogue Partnerships have proceeded smoothly focusing on economic, trade, social-cultural and functional cooperation as well as cooperation in non-traditional security issues. The recent political dynamics seem to have changed with the raising of disputes in East Asia and the emergence of big power rivalry in the region. Hopefully the territorial disputes and the emergent big power rivalry as well as the new political dynamics will not affect the ongoing economic cooperation and integration in East Asia as the new members seem to be more focused on political and security issues.

Challenge for ASEAN

The expanded EAS can be a forum to discuss and promote peace and stability and cooperation in East Asia but how the big powers – the US and China -- respond will be important to determine if this is possible. It will also depend on whether ASEAN with its central role could help to manage this challenging situation.

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