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Asia Pacific Summits: How China, US and ASEAN can Collaborate

By Zha Daojiong

Synopsis

The annual series of summits in the Asia Pacific has begun. Questions abound about the efficacy of these high-profile meetings. It's time that China, the United States and Southeast Asia think about collaborating on non-traditional security projects.

Commentary

THE SEASON of multilateral diplomacy between ASEAN Foreign Ministers and their Dialogue Partners has begun in Bali, Indonesia, culminating in the ASEAN Regional Forum on 23 July 2011. This will be followed by the summit-level dialogues such as ASEAN Plus Three and the East Asia Summit in October before the leaders of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum meeting in November in Hawaii.

Such multi-layered summits, though prompted by necessity, also invite questions about their efficacy. Multilateral summit meetings evolve along two trajectories of logic: first, they have to be relevant by addressing breaking events and issues of the day; second, they have to face the law of diminishing returns as they can become irrelevant if deemed to be perfunctory gatherings for photo opportunities.

Summit Efficacy

An important rationale for holding region-wide summits is to socialise big powers outside the Southeast Asian region. By agreeing to participate in these meetings, big powers like China and the United States demonstrate that they do treat smaller states as equals. Through persistent efforts to bring China and the US to the same conference tables, small states can ensure that those big powers not get conflicting messages. This reduces the risk of misunderstanding between big powers about regional issues, which can arise at the expense of smaller states.

Reality, however, does not always follow designs. As big powers, both China and the US tend to prioritise the handling of their ties with other big powers and expend intellectual and diplomatic capital on global rather than regional issues. Their attention to the demands and preferences of small states often then becomes reactive and defined by necessity. Consequently the small states are tempted to play one big power against another, while hoping to reap benefits from both.

International relations analysts frequently refer to such a state of affairs as deficit in strategic trust. However, as the growth of Asia-Pacific summitry since the end of the Cold War has demonstrated, that deficit can take on a

life of its own even with frequent summits. It is often difficult to tell if one summit actually worked to enhance or worsen the level of trust despite bilateral meetings that take place behind closed doors.

It is essential that the setting of a summit agenda is less reactive to headlines of the day and more reflective of longer-term needs. One way to ensure a meeting of minds about the long-term is to make easily available systematic gathering and appraisal of member states' domestic policies and challenges. It is desirable for the Asia Pacific countries to have a comparable level of mutual knowledge and assessment as what the OECD research wing is doing for Trans-Atlantic summits and ministerial meetings.

Three-way Collaboration

The process of building trust can start with China, the US and ASEAN states, whose preferences influence the summit agenda more than other members. They shoulder a greater level of responsibility to improve the attraction of these summits, by showing they are less influenced by lack of trust among the three in the setting of agenda for region-wide meetings.

China and the US should go further than not letting Southeast Asia derail the pursuit of their bilateral relationships. Scholars and diplomats in Beijing and Washington should work harder at finding ways to pool together Chinese, American and Southeast Asian resources to deal with non-traditional security challenges such as food, environment and fisheries that continue to trouble the region.

This would reflect the simple logic that hardcore geostrategic calculation is but one facet of diplomacy. Notwithstanding some high dramas of diplomacy, since the Korean War, Beijing and Washington have studiously managed to avoid getting into military conflict. It is in the respective interests of China and the US to continue making conflict avoidance a favoured choice. It would be wise for Beijing and Washington to avoid being drawn into any potential minefield set up in Southeast Asia or elsewhere.

In the context of Southeast Asian interests, the politics of asymmetry in diplomacy carries with it a huge risk. Cold War-era Cambodia and Vietnam offer many lessons about the management of external power involvement, whatever the initial motivation might have been. Working with China and the US (as well as another power, as need be) simultaneously, then, can help avoid misplaced suspicions of big power rivalry. The process of the three sides working together on non-traditional security projects will help promote better understanding, besides facilitating, economic cooperation and even political and cultural relations. Such substantive collaboration can neutralise the corrosive effects of media commentary that dismiss the series of regional summits as mere "talk shops".

To Make Collaboration Work

To make such collaboration work, the three sides should not just establish another routine of meetings between bureaucrats, diplomats, or heads of government. Instead, the focus should be on concrete and tangible projects. A project can have full backing from the respective governments but is not premised upon traditional protocols of diplomacy.

Such collaboration will need to depart from existing development aid programmes from China or the US to Southeast Asian countries. A good example can be found in the Asian Development Bank's requirement of co-financing before launching a project and its choice of willing partners in the group (leaving sceptics to make decisions on their own). Each party can of course take credit for its work.

Similarly, there should be no demand for unanimity in ASEAN participation. This can also be helpful in dealing with the complaint of meeting for the sake of meetings. Last but not least, such collaboration cannot resolve overnight the long standing problems and suspicions in the geo-political realm between China, the US and Southeast Asian states. But it merits consideration as a practical way to soften the ground and contribute to a lessening of diplomatic tensions among countries of the Asia-Pacific.

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