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ASEAN Centrality: Year of Big Power Transitions

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Synopsis

As the global community continues to grapple with political and economic uncertainties, ASEAN must resist the temptation to look inward if it is to maintain its much vaunted centrality amidst big power transitions.

Commentary

MUCH has been made over the last decade on the rise of Asia – led by China and India – and the continent's increasingly important role in global politics. The announcement by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton last November that the 21st century would be America's "Pacific Century" would have further strengthened the belief that the future epicentre of global politics would be located in Asia. In light of various leadership transitions taking place later this year among the big powers, one can expect conditions in Asia to factor significantly in the political discourse of their leaders.

ASEAN, US and China

What does Asia's increasing prominence mean for ASEAN – a ten-member political grouping whose regional presence has received growing attention from the global community of late? Already the United States has embarked on its "forward-deployed diplomacy" strategy in the region as evinced by Hillary Clinton's attendance at last year's ASEAN Regional Forum and her landmark visit to Myanmar in December. The US' recent conduct of separate high-level meetings with both the Philippines and Singapore over defence and security issues suggests that ASEAN will be a strategic region for Washington.

Likewise Beijing has also embarked on its own charm offensive – by putting its money where its mouth is. By matching its political rhetoric with material resources, China has increasingly built its reputation as a credible long-term stakeholder within the region. In addition to the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area - now the third largest in the world by trade volume - Beijing has also embarked on new initiatives such as the Greater Mekong Subregion cooperation, the emerging Beibu Gulf Economic Rim, the Nanning-Singapore Economic Corridor as well as the East-West Economic Corridors on the Indochinese peninsula.

In 2009, the Chinese government also proposed a fund of US\$10 billion to build infrastructure and a loan of US\$15 billion for other developmental projects in the region over the next three to five years. Beijing's ability to maintain its stellar economic performance despite the global economic downturn has also prompted analysts to suggest that China could emerge as an independent source of demand – and the potential of the Chinese consumer to replace, at least partially, the consumption loss in the West.

The need to straddle both Washington's and Beijing's interests is not lost on ASEAN as noted by Singapore's Foreign Minister K Shanmugam. While on his visit to Washington earlier this month (February) he had suggested that the US needed to avoid anti-Chinese rhetoric in its domestic debates. Ambassador-at-Large Professor Tommy Koh, in a recent interview, explained the ASEAN strategy as "[bringing] the major powers (particularly the US and China) together and embed them in a cooperative framework...thereby [reducing] the deficit of trust".

With the newly revamped East Asia Summit (EAS) hogging the regional limelight of late, some scholars have also described the need for ASEAN to lead the EAS in such a way as to make it "acceptable to Beijing as well as relevant to Washington".

Overstretching Asean centrality

One approach currently being pursued is the stress on "ASEAN centrality" – the notion of an ASEAN-led regional architecture in which the region's relations with the wider world are conducted with the interest of the ASEAN community in mind. Over the years, this strategy's usefulness has been demonstrated at the EAS, a forum whose agenda and membership are determined solely by ASEAN members. The inclusion of the US and Russia in the meeting last year suggests that greater attention is accorded to the ASEAN political theatre.

Last year's ASEAN Regional Forum also witnessed ASEAN countries engaging in a wide range of issues from territorial disputes in the South China Sea to North Korea's nuclear weapons' programme. Indeed, the forum found considerable traction among top global leaders, as seen by the twin attendance of both Hillary Clinton and China's Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi. According to ASEAN secretary-general Surin Pitsuwan in an interview last year, "the fact that the world is interested in ASEAN's forums and ASEAN's stage [means] that we have delivered, it means we have served the purpose and that there are values in our stewardship of this architecture of cooperation [in East Asia]".

Nevertheless, there is a danger of overstretching the usefulness and effectiveness of such an approach, especially if ASEAN states start to adopt an "inward-looking, it-is-all-about-ASEAN mentality". Paradoxically speaking, ASEAN's ascension to global prominence came about as a result of ASEAN states' willingness to open themselves up to the wider global community of nations. In other words, ASEAN centrality was made possible because individual ASEAN countries chose to align their fortunes with the rest of the world, and in doing so, resulted in the collective success of the ASEAN community.

Need to be outward-looking

In light of the increasingly complex and multifaceted nature of global challenges, the tendency and temptation for ASEAN to look inwards and close in on itself will grow. Anxieties over big power relations and the uncertainties of how these interactions would play out could lead ASEAN member states to possibly disengage from global challenges and instead develop parochial and isolationist tendencies.

The Bali Concord III which was signed last November by ASEAN leaders must not be used to justify an overly ASEAN-centric view of the world. Indeed such an outcome would paralyse the region whose very growth was founded upon its diverse and dynamic relationships its member states have with the wider world.

Already the first two months of 2012 have witnessed the emergence of several political narratives that could define global matters for the rest of the year. Events such as the ongoing Syrian crisis, the Greek financial impasse and Iran's defiance of international sanctions will test the resourcefulness and resolve of the community in articulating a proper response.

Inevitably ASEAN will be drawn into the picture: to what extent ASEAN is able to maintain its global engagement while at the same time keeping its own house in order will be a critical test of its readiness – and relevance – as a regional stakeholder.

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