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After the Phnom Penh AMM Failure: ASEAN needs to regain cohesion and solidarity

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Synopsis

The failure of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in Phnom Penh to issue a joining communique shows the deep divisions in ASEAN over the South China Sea (SCS) disputes. This would affect ASEAN's ability to deal with the emerging big power rivalry in the region, which could affect ASEAN's unity and solidarity, and its role of promoting cooperation among its members.

Commentary

The outcome of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in Phnom Penh last week was a significant watershed in ASEAN's history. It was the first time since its establishment in 1967 that ASEAN was so divided over one issue that it prevented ASEAN from issuing the usual Joint Communique at the end of the AMM. In the past, ASEAN had always been able to arrive at some compromise in the "ASEAN way." Its failure to do so this time reflected the seriousness of the situation.

The media reports before and during the AMM were about the differences among some ASEAN members over the territorial disputes in the South China Sea (SCS) which dominated the AMM instead of the more important issues of economic and other functional cooperation in ASEAN. The Philippines and Vietnam were reported as wanting to include in the communique references to the recent marine incidents in the South China Sea involving their ships and Chinese vessels. Cambodia, as Chairman, argued that such mention of bilateral disputes was not appropriate for the AMM communique.

Divisions within ASEAN – Lack of cohesion and solidarity

The issue overshadowed ASEAN's efforts to make progress towards an ASEAN Economic Community in 2015. ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan said that in not being able to issue the Joint Communique, the AMM could not record the issues and proposals for the ASEAN Summit's consideration and decisions later in the year. This development showed up ASEAN's lack of cohesion and solidarity in pursuing issues of common interest to ASEAN, unlike in the past.

What happened at the recent AMM should be taken seriously by ASEAN as a wake-up call. For the first time certain individual ASEAN countries were prepared to pursue their own interest to the extent of disregarding ASEAN's cohesion and the practice of finding a compromise for ASEAN's common interests. This issue has become more challenging for ASEAN because of the emerging big power rivalry in the region including in the

SCS. ASEAN is entering a new era of big power rivalry from which it has tried to keep away since its establishment. ASEAN should now reflect on the new situation and consider the way forward to ensure ASEAN cohesion and to maintain its important role in the region.

Over the years, ASEAN has been able to establish its importance and relevance as a neutral platform and a convenor for the major powers to meet with ASEAN countries and among themselves. ASEAN centrality was recognised in the multi-layered regional institutions architecture like the ASEAN+1, ASEAN +3, ARF, EAS and ADMM Plus. These have enabled ASEAN to cooperate among themselves and with the major powers to build a peaceful and prosperous region, thus enhancing the importance of ASEAN regionally and internationally.

The South China Sea disputes are complex and complicated as the claims are not only territorial but also historical in nature. As such, the SCS disputes will not be resolved for a long time to come. The SCS disputes involved only four ASEAN countries with China and Taiwan, and is not an ASEAN-China problem. ASEAN's approach has been that the disputes should be resolved peacefully among the claimant states in accordance with international law and UNCLOS, supported by the Declaration of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and the Implementing Guidelines of 2011.

ASEAN and China are working towards a Code of Conduct to facilitate negotiations among the claimant states to resolve their disputes. Freedom of navigation was never a problem through the South China Sea as all regional countries as well as the major powers have a stake to ensure freedom of commercial navigation as about half of the world's trade and energy pass through the Southeast Asia region.

Emerging big power rivalry – Challenges for ASEAN

Aside from the SCS disputes, the expanded EAS is another area of concern as the EAS meeting in November 2011 has shifted the agenda to political and security from the earlier economic and functional cooperation pursued by the EAS. Thus future cooperation in the expanded EAS is uncertain and ASEAN centrality could be challenged if it could not set the agenda and drive the process.

The new era of emerging big power rivalry in the region involves the US' enhanced engagement in the Asia region and its pivot or re-balancing of its military forces to Asia Pacific as well as China's response to the US strategy to constrict it. This rivalry has an impact on ASEAN as already evident in the US intervention in the SCS disputes at the ARF meeting in July 2010, and China's refusal of external involvement or even regional participation in its bilateral disputes.

The AMM has been distracted from its main purpose and objectives by the SCS disputes which would not be resolved for a long time to come. ASEAN countries should recognise that continued ASEAN cooperation in economic and other functional areas and ASEAN's unity are so important to the well being of all its members. In the past, ASEAN had been able to progress as it could always find a compromise through the "ASEAN way" when they encountered differences. Looking forward, ASEAN should review what has happened at the AMM and in recent times and consider how it can regain its cohesion and solidarity for ASEAN to maintain its relevance and role in the region to further ASEAN's interests.

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