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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **ASEAN at 45: A Case for Principled Realism**

By Benjamin Ho

### **Synopsis**

*Regional flare-ups over territorial sovereignty have placed ASEAN's cohesion and solidarity under the spotlight. The ability of ASEAN to stay neutral in its own backyard is increasingly challenged by the clashing interests of big powers. ASEAN states should temper the pursuit of national interests with established principles.*

### **Commentary**

ASEAN'S COHESIVENESS and capability were stress-tested at the 45th annual ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Phnom Penh in July 2012 and found wanting. The AMM's failure to issue a joint communique, the first time in its 45-year history, reflected the inability of the Cambodian chair and some other members to reconcile their differences over the mention of territorial disputes in the South China Sea involving China.

While Cambodia claimed that it acted from the "position of principle" of not wanting ASEAN to take sides on bilateral matters, other members asserted that not making any reference to the dispute would be irresponsible and dent ASEAN's credibility.

### **ASEAN neutral, forward-looking**

During his visit to Beijing in early September Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong declared that the South China Sea was a major issue in ASEAN's own region and that its credibility would be severely damaged if it chose not to address it. PM Lee added that it was important for ASEAN "not to take sides on the various claims" but to "take and state a position which is neutral, forward-looking, and encourages the peaceful resolution of issues".

In a joint statement on 13 Sept, PM Lee and Vietnam Party leader Nguyen Phu Trong called for the peaceful resolution of the situation in the South China Sea in accordance with international law. They expressed the hope that discussions between ASEAN and China on a Code of Conduct to manage the South China Sea territorial disputes peacefully could start as "soon as possible".

Historically, ASEAN has pursued a policy of neutrality, as evinced in the Declaration of the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in 1971, which placed great emphasis on maintaining equidistance with the big powers. Since the end of the Cold War the role of ASEAN has shifted from a reticent passenger to an active driver initiating dialogue relations and economic partnerships with the key powers from the United States to

China, India and Russia, culminating with the East Asia Summit (ASEAN Plus Eight) in 2011. ASEAN has also taken and stated positions on global issues while abstaining from involvement in disputes between major powers.

### **Choosing between Washington and Beijing**

Nevertheless, a second and perhaps more pressing concern would be whether ASEAN would be forced to choose between Washington and Beijing. This is where the ASEAN community would have to tread carefully to ensure its long-term goals are not held hostage by short-term choices. Indeed both the US and China have increased their footprints in Asia over the past decade – economically and militarily.

Given the preponderant influence the US has historically wielded in the region, one can argue that relations between Washington and ASEAN are institutionalised enough to provide some degree of political predictability. As such, the US pivot towards Asia should not be considered a new policy of the Obama administration, but rather a long-term effort to sustain US access and presence in a region that will survive changes of administrations.

In an interview earlier this year, Singapore's Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen reflected the view of more than one ASEAN country when he described Singapore's defence relations with the US as being "qualitatively different" from that with China - one that is based on a "longer history and shared perspectives on a range of regional issues".

Nevertheless, Beijing's strategic diplomacy over the years has resulted in growing ties between itself and ASEAN, especially the developing ASEAN countries such as Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. Being ASEAN's largest trading partner, Beijing has since expanded its economic influence to include more than just being the world's largest factory. Indeed, the influx of Chinese renminbi into financial markets has allowed Beijing to push for a greater internationalisation of its currency. But more than its economic muscle, Beijing also weighs in heavily in the international system; in the words of PM Lee, "[China] is such a major player that no global issue can be resolved without China's participation".

As such, a more circumspect assessment of ASEAN's dealings with the US and China would be to recognise the extent of domestic sentiments being factored in both countries' foreign policy. While international headlines often mention the rivalry and tensions between the two countries, a more accurate assessment would also have to take into account the positive signs that have emerged in the Sino-US relationship. These include their common response to North Korea's April 2012 rocket test and the significant levels of cooperation in addressing the Iranian nuclear challenge. Both Beijing and Washington are aware of the global stakes and are also actively interacting with each other to ensure that their interests remain best served.

### **ASEAN's future: a principled realism**

While it is important that ASEAN countries are able to share a common vision of the region's future, a realistic appraisal of the varying national interests at stake would mean that the ASEAN community cannot possibly be expected to agree on every issue. In light of America's pivot to Asia and the perceived expansion of Chinese power, the interests of ASEAN states would be better served by continually expanding their relations with other regional and global partners.

Indeed, the expanded East Asia Summit and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, both with substantial participation from ASEAN, have allowed individual ASEAN states to look beyond regional shores in their articulation of national interests.

Nonetheless, it is important for ASEAN states to remain cognizant of their common obligations to the wider ASEAN community and to act in accordance with established international principles. As PM Lee reiterated in Beijing, "ASEAN must remain united to be able to exercise influence on the international stage, to have our voices heard, and to secure and advance our common interests".

Indeed, no ASEAN state can act in isolation from the ASEAN community; the pursuit of national interests cannot be separated from the need to be good neighbours and partners. At 45 years, ASEAN's fortunes – and future – are closely bound together.

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