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East Asia Summit 2012: Power Game in Asia Unfolds

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

The recently-concluded EAS in Phnom Penh, Cambodia has ushered in an intense phase of diplomatic engagements among major, medium and small powers amid unprecedented tensions in the region. The EAS as the primary vehicle will shape the course of Asia in years to come.

Commentary

EAST ASIA last week turned into a stage for a new “Asian Drama” as major, medium and small powers converged for the most intense power diplomacy in the region in years. The convergence of key actors of varying degrees of influence and sizes was unprecedented, yet the desired outcome of the diplomatic efforts to manage these clashing interests in Asia is still a long way off.

Indeed, the full impact of the unfolding power game will not be known for some time. What is certain, however, is that something hugely significant has just taken place. Going forward, Asia will not be the same again. Several layers or dimensions of this power game were at play all at once.

Multi-layered tussle for influence

Firstly, the world's established power, the United States, expanded its “pivot” or strategic rebalancing towards Asia, led personally by a newly re-elected President Obama. His presence at the 7th East Asia Summit (EAS) in Phnom Penh on 20 November 2012 underscored his self-image as America's “first Pacific president” who launched the pivot strategy last year with a marines base in Darwin, Australia. Expanding the pivot strategy into Southeast Asia, he revived an old treaty alliance with Thailand; went on a historic visit to Myanmar to prop up that country's incipient political reform; and symbolically admonished Cambodia for its domestic repression.

The US rebalancing culminated in a direct engagement at the EAS with Asia's emerging power and potential rival, China, which will be led in the next decade by a new leadership whose attitude towards the US and Southeast Asia remains untested.

The US-China engagement in ASEAN's backyard was a manifestation of two conflicting goals - competition for influence in Asia by the two powers even as they declared their mutual desire for greater cooperation as the world's two largest economies. China sees the pivot as an Obama-led ring-fencing of its peaceful rise; China responded to this at the EAS with another push to keep the US out of Beijing's South China Sea disputes with

several ASEAN states.

Indeed, Beijing's assertiveness to shape the resolution of the South China Sea disputes was the second dimension of the power game. It led to a replay of the proxy tussle, leading to internal divisions within ASEAN caused by host Cambodia's poor handling of the increasingly divisive issue. For the first time in ASEAN history, the Chairman's draft closing statement had to be openly contradicted and corrected by fellow ASEAN leaders for its "inaccuracies". Hun Sen had wrongly claimed – reflecting his eagerness to please Beijing – that the leaders had reached a consensus not to "internationalise the issue".

Power of economics

The third layer of the power game was the entry of a new race for economic influence and preponderance: ASEAN officially launched the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to pull together Asia's major economies as one integrated dynamo for growth. The RCEP, a huge free trade area likely to be dominated by China through its sheer size, is a potential rival to the US-led Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). Manifesting yet another layer of the diplomatic tussle, China, Japan and South Korea within the RCEP will form their own Northeast Asian free trade area despite current tensions over their maritime disputes in the East China Sea. If successful, their trilateral FTA will overshadow the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) given the combined economic heft of the three Northeast Asian economies.

The RCEP is a smart strategic move by ASEAN to offset the projected shortfall of its own ASEAN Community 2015 project at regional integration. With just three years to go, analysts are sceptical of a fully integrated ASEAN community given the foot-dragging by some members over economic liberalisation and the gulf between the more advanced and newer member-states.

Still, the emergence of the RCEP, TPP, and AFTA, not to mention the long-standing Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and the future China-Japan-Korea trilateral FTA, is more than coincidental. It reflects what Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described as the strategic power of economic forces - the rise of the "economics of power" and the "power of economics". Though competing, both the RCEP and TPP, could over the long term, interestingly, take a positive turn and end up merging into one big FTA called the Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific (FTAAP).

Two possible outcomes for ASEAN

The Asian power game can have one of two possible outcomes for ASEAN: either it gets trampled underfoot in the proverbial jungle of fighting elephants. Or it survives by staying together through agility and wit like the proverbial Malay sang kancil or mousedeer. What we have just seen at the back-to-back regional summits is ASEAN struggling to steer itself between a rock and a hard place. But the motivation is the same - survival in the face of the growing pressure from competing forces out to shape and react to the evolving architecture in the Asia Pacific.

Unfortunately, the inherent weaknesses of ASEAN caused by conflicting interests among members have been exposed once again; yet at the same time, their overriding desire to stay on top of the of the power game is evident. The group has a codeword for this herculean task: "ASEAN centrality".

The battle for ASEAN centrality is, however, hardly over; the EAS in Phnom Penh was just the opening chapter. Over the next few years, especially towards 2015, more drama may unfold as the geostrategic tussle gets more intense and complicated while ASEAN seeks safe passage through the unfolding power game of the giants.

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