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ASEAN-China Relations: Key Junctures for Singapore as Country Coordinator

By Shawn Ho

Synopsis

As the country coordinator of ASEAN-China dialogue relations for three years till mid 2018, Singapore is well placed as a non-claimant state to the South China Sea disputes to help reduce tensions and expedite realisation of the proposed Code of Conduct (COC).

Commentary

DESPITE THEIR multi-faceted nature, ASEAN-China dialogue relations – which Singapore will be coordinating for another two years - are set to be overshadowed by the worsening South China Sea disputes.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated on 23 April 2016 that China had reached a four-point 'consensus' with Brunei, Cambodia and Laos on the South China Sea territorial disputes. They agreed that the disputes are "not an issue between China and ASEAN as a whole". It is clear that this view is a reinforcement of China's support for a bilateral approach as opposed to the ASEAN-China approach. Singapore, in its role as the current ASEAN-China dialogue relations country coordinator, could make important contributions to the building of consensus among the parties involved at three critical junctures this year, with the ultimate goal of formulating the proposed Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea.

Hague ruling on Philippines vs China case

The first key juncture is the final ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration at the

Hague on the case brought forth by the Philippines against China's claims in the South China Sea. This ruling is expected within the next two months.

Regardless of which side the ruling favours, Singapore could get ASEAN to issue a joint statement after the Hague's ruling to reflect a united ASEAN position. ASEAN cannot afford to have another episode of open disagreement such as the failure to issue a joint statement – for the first time in its history – at the 45th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM) in Cambodia in 2012 with regards to the South China Sea disputes.

The discussions leading to the issuing of a joint statement by ASEAN would help other ASEAN member states understand the intentions of Brunei, Cambodia and Laos in striking such a consensus with China and allay any fears of a deeper split within the grouping. ASEAN solidarity is key at this juncture if any progress is to be achieved with China in the coming months.

ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference with China

The second key juncture this year is the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference with China (PMC) which is scheduled to take place in late July after the ruling at the Hague. As this is the next occasion where all 11 Foreign Ministers will get to meet together, it is an opportune moment for Singapore, as the country coordinator of ASEAN-China dialogue relations, to make a major contribution towards the easing of tensions between China and the claimant states of ASEAN by framing the South China Sea disputes as just one of many issues in the broader ASEAN-China relationship.

As Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in July 2015 of Singapore's role as country coordinator: "We hope to try and find common ground among members of ASEAN and facilitate the discussion between ASEAN and China...We also hope to help ASEAN hammer out more cooperative projects with China...These projects need not all be economic ones, but could include cooperation in human resource development and education".

By the time of the PMC, Singapore will have participated in the 10th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) in May and the 49th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM) in late July (just prior to the PMC). These two meetings will have allowed Singapore to gain a sense of the latest positions and concerns of the various ASEAN member states on the South China Sea disputes. Therefore, the PMC would be a prime occasion to present the viewpoints of ASEAN member states, emphasise the commonalities with China's position, and also "zoom out" to focus on the other positive and broader aspects of cooperation between ASEAN and China.

At this PMC, one of the concrete outcomes could be the adoption of a recent proposal by Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan for ASEAN and China to "work together towards an enhanced Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) to prevent miscalculations on the ground and at sea".

ASEAN-China Commemorative Summit

The third key juncture is the ASEAN-China Commemorative Summit in September in Laos to mark 25 years of dialogue relations. All parties involved will wish to see the Summit conducted/concluded in a congenial manner with the issuance of a joint statement including the South China Sea (among other matters).

In the joint statement of the 14th ASEAN-China Summit to commemorate the 20th Anniversary of Dialogue Relations in 2011, Article Nine stated that the parties involved will “work towards the eventual adoption, on the basis of consensus, of a code of conduct in the South China Sea”.

The target for Singapore at this year’s Commemorative Summit could be to try its best to get the various parties together to work towards a stronger, more concrete, and landmark statement of action with regards to the COC. Singapore would be in an excellent position to push for the expedition of negotiations on formulating the COC especially since it is a non-claimant state and does not take sides in the disputes. Moreover, Singapore is a neutral party which not only has longstanding and close ties with China, but is also a country not bound by a formal security alliance with the United States (and the ensuing strategic considerations).

Singapore’s Chairmanship of ASEAN in 2018

Looking beyond 2016 – a year in which Singapore can seek to show ASEAN unity, reduce tensions in the region and expedite the negotiations on formulating the COC – it is noteworthy that Singapore’s final six months as country coordinator of ASEAN-China dialogue relations will overlap with its role as ASEAN Chair during the first half of 2018.

Being in the “driver’s seat” on both fronts for the first half of 2018 means that Singapore can make a final push to make further headway in COC negotiations between ASEAN and China (assuming they are yet to be finalised by then).

The next country coordinator - after Singapore finishes its term in mid 2018 - will be the Philippines. Given the tensions between the Philippines and China over the South China Sea disputes and the likelihood that there will not be much headway in the COC during the Philippines’ term, this year could be the start of a limited window available for a breakthrough. Singapore, as country coordinator of ASEAN-China dialogue relations, must make the best use of this rare chance to make a lasting contribution to peace and security in the region.

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