

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.

ASEAN Unity in the Face of China's Unilateral "Consensus"

By Bhubhindar Singh, Shawn Ho & Henrick Z. Tsjeng

Synopsis

Following the recent conclusion of the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting, some media reports suggest that China had pressured ASEAN countries to agree to a 10-point "consensus" summing up the talks. This brings to mind China's claimed four-point "consensus" with Brunei, Cambodia and Laos in April on the South China Sea disputes and the question of whether ASEAN unity is still intact.

Commentary

THE RECENT Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Kunming, China, concluded in what many have termed "disarray", once again over the South China Sea issue. It was reported that an apparent joint statement by ASEAN expressing their "serious concerns" over recent developments in the South China Sea was supposed to have been read out at a joint press conference with China. However, China's pressure on ASEAN countries to support its own 10-point "consensus" statement, which ASEAN could not accept, led to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi helming the press conference by himself.

Many analysts view this latest episode, together with how ASEAN will react to an upcoming judgement in a case filed by the Philippines at the Permanent Court of Arbitration over the South China Sea disputes, as a test of ASEAN's unity. As such, it is timely to revisit Minister Wang's prior announcement of a four-point "consensus" reached with Brunei, Cambodia and Laos in April this year – which contained supposed agreements between the four countries on approaches to manage the South China Sea disputes – and evaluate the recent state of ASEAN unity.

Divergent Perspectives of those Bilateral Meetings

As that four-point “consensus” was only between three ASEAN countries and China, rather than between ASEAN as a whole and China, this would initially appear to indicate a split in ASEAN. However, upon further examination of official statements by Brunei, Cambodia and Laos, there appears to have been a divergence between their views and China’s perspective on what was really agreed upon in each bilateral meeting.

In their respective foreign ministry’s post-meeting statements, both Brunei and Laos avoided making any specific references to the South China Sea disputes and there was no mention of any agreement with China. As for Cambodia, its foreign ministry did not even issue a post-meeting statement regarding their bilateral meeting with China.

Cambodia’s government spokesman Phay Siphon did, however, confirm two days after China’s announcement that no deal had been reached with China: “There’s been no agreement or discussions, just a visit by a Chinese Foreign Minister.”

China’s Strategy

It is clear that China had gone to each of those three ASEAN countries with the intention to reach separate agreements with them over the South China Sea disputes. The choice of countries that Minister Wang visited – and the seven ASEAN countries that he did not visit on that trip – also provides some clues on China’s assessment of the countries which would not react negatively to that China-declared “consensus”. Such a move, as well as Chinese pressure on some ASEAN countries at the recent Special Meeting, can be seen as part of a broader strategy by China to project a split in ASEAN and garner support for its position in view of the upcoming judgement by the Permanent Court of Arbitration.

That four-point “consensus” had provided the impression that China had convened a meeting with all three ASEAN countries at the same time and had an agreement over their common approach in managing the South China Sea disputes. That was evidently not true, especially since none of the statements issued by the foreign ministries of the three ASEAN countries had used the term “consensus” (or a term containing a similar meaning) with reference to the South China Sea disputes.

This implies that the three ASEAN countries may not have viewed the “consensus” in the same light as China, and that Brunei, Cambodia and Laos may still have viewed the common ASEAN position as more important. The use of the word “consensus” therefore appears to have been China’s unilateral idea, something which China appears to have wanted to do yet again at the recent Special Meeting in Kunming.

ASEAN’s Unity

If not for the relatively unified stance that ASEAN took at this Special Meeting in rejecting China’s 10-point “consensus”, there could well have been another instance of China unilaterally declaring that a “consensus” had been reached with ASEAN at the press conference. As a bloc of 10 Southeast Asian states, ASEAN was able to achieve what Brunei, Cambodia and Laos were previously unable to do on their own,

that is: preventing the Chinese narrative of meeting proceedings from dominating international media headlines.

This most recent episode in Kunming, in which ASEAN pushed back China's 10-point "consensus" and absent itself at the planned joint press conference with Minister Wang, did in the end signal to the international community that ASEAN is still relatively united and will not bow to Chinese pressure.

This relative degree of unity of ASEAN was also evident at last year's ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) in Kuala Lumpur. At this meeting, ASEAN was united in deciding not to issue a joint declaration, knowing that discussions over the joint declaration would result in endless acrimonious debates over the South China Sea disputes, favouring instead a chairman's statement that mentioned the South China Sea issue. This served ASEAN's purpose of preserving its policy position and unity in light of the competing pressures from the Plus countries, especially from the United States and China.

Therefore, the conclusion can be drawn that concerns over a fracture in ASEAN unity may not have been as deep-seated as media reports have been making it out to be in recent months.

Looking ahead, ASEAN will nonetheless continue to face challenges. Singapore's Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen said at the recent Shangri-La Dialogue that ASEAN's assertion of its centrality is a "position attained by default". All major powers have consistently recognised and accepted ASEAN centrality. The key challenge in the years ahead for ASEAN, however, is whether it can continue to remain united in the face of the major shifts to the regional landscape, which is witnessing escalated great-power competition between the United States and China.

A divided ASEAN is not in the interest of the ten Southeast Asian states, nor of the major powers. Only a united ASEAN can be taken seriously on the international stage and only then can it make positive and long-lasting contributions to the international affairs of the twenty-first century.

Bhubhindar Singh is Associate Professor and Coordinator of the Regional Security Architecture Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. Shawn Ho and Henrick Z. Tsjeng are Associate Research Fellows at the same programme. An earlier version of this commentary was previously published in The National Interest on 14 June 2016.
