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China's Hegemonic Trajectory: Intimidating ASEAN?

By Mushahid Ali

Synopsis

Fierce criticism of Singapore by China's spokespersons for allegedly stirring up tension over the South China Sea at international forums reflects a pattern of interference in ASEAN's deliberations; this suggests that Beijing is embarked on a hegemonic trajectory in Asia.

Commentary

RECENT CRITICISM of Singapore by Chinese scholars and pundits over South China Sea tensions further underscores a noticeable turning point in China's assertiveness as a rising power. The turn is all the more significant because it involves a sharp dip in the highly publicised warm relationship between the two countries particularly in the economic and political domain as symbolised by their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

It is therefore incongruous that Beijing's media pundits and defence scholars should deem it fit to take Singapore to task for allegedly stirring the pot of South China Sea tensions. They even cited fabricated reports of what Singapore was said to have done at the recent Non-Aligned Summit in Venezuela, contrary to the official record of what it stated, and threatened to punish Singapore for it.

Chinese intervention in NAM

At the recent Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit, Chinese diplomats prevailed on the Host Country and the NAM Chair, Venezuela, not to allow regional states to follow the established practice of settling the relevant regional paragraphs in their own way. ASEAN, which was always responsible for the Southeast Asia portion of

the communique, was prevented from updating the Southeast Asian situation because China did not want reference to the ASEAN Summit paragraphs on South China Sea.

The Chinese intervened through their allies and pushed for retaining the old paragraphs of about two years old which seemed to serve China's interests. In so doing China displayed the classic behaviour of a hegemonic power in securing its interest over the objection of regional states.

Chinese leaders talk often about mutual respect, win-win cooperation and equality of states. They do not seem to mean what they utter but expect other countries to follow their wishes. They have resorted to the use of proxies to pressure Singapore to subordinate its long standing relations with the United States, Japan and other ASEAN countries, to what Beijing desires.

Amazingly while the Chinese excoriate everyone else to fall in line, cowing the smaller and younger ASEAN member states in the process, Beijing continues to cozy up to the Americans and deal with them on various fronts.

China to dominate East Asia?

Is China seeking to dominate East Asia by asserting its historical rights to the region, insisting on its claims to almost all of the South China Sea and disregarding the legal rights of neighbouring countries based on international law? Does China aspire to be a great power that ignores the legal rights of other countries and refuses to subscribe to the established rules of international behaviour, respecting the sovereignty and interests of its neighbours? Or does it care only for the goodwill and respect of other major powers like the US and Russia?

If China wants to be respected as a major power and its views of regional and international affairs given due regard in the current world order, should China not pay equal regard to the views and interests of other Asian powers like Japan, India and ASEAN, instead of insisting on the untrammelled rights of a rising power that has yet to fulfil the requirements of a super power in economic and military terms?

With a heritage of 5,000 years of history should China not conduct itself as a civilised nation in its behaviour towards its regional and international partners instead of treating them as inferior subordinates? Or is it just seeking to ape the power politics of Europe and America, seeking hegemony by asserting its historical rights? Or is China seeking to overturn a century of humiliation by western imperial powers by seeking a rebalance to ASEAN and exhibiting imperial tendencies over its Asian neighbours?

China and Singapore

The Chinese want Singapore to take into account their interests but they would not accept Singapore's interests in upholding the rule of law and the principle of rules-based regime for the conduct of inter-state relations and maintaining the freedom of navigation and overflight of the South China Sea.

Singapore and its ASEAN partners have to respond to the calumny of Chinese armchair generals and media pundits in their attempt to divide and conquer ASEAN and intimidate its small neighbours to submit to the Chinese viewpoint of regional disputes and international affairs.

Singapore and other states of ASEAN have to assert their sovereignty and freedom to maintain a friendly relationship with China and other major powers based on the principles of equality and mutual interest. They cannot and will not accept a relationship based on differentials of economic and military power or population and prosperity, regardless of their being in Asia, America or Eurasia.

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