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Strengthening ASEAN-US Relations: Korean Peninsula as Conduit?

By Shawn Ho and Sarah Teo

Synopsis

Much attention has been paid to how the recently concluded 30th ASEAN Summit in Manila has dealt with the South China Sea disputes. Now is perhaps the time for ASEAN to strengthen its regional security credentials by paying more attention to the challenge on the Korean Peninsula.

Commentary

WHILE THE South China Sea issue remains undoubtedly important for ASEAN, it should not be seen as the association's *raison d'être*. ASEAN has a broad agenda that includes regional economic integration, promoting defence relations and socio-cultural cooperation, all of which are essential to its role as the central regional institution in Southeast Asia.

Considering the current salience of Korean Peninsular security to Beijing and Washington, if ASEAN is to do more to deal with the challenge on the Korean Peninsula, ASEAN's relevance and importance to both major powers could be enhanced. This could also be particularly timely given the upcoming meeting between ASEAN foreign ministers and US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in Washington DC this week on 4 May 2017.

Two Contrasting Approaches: South China Sea and North Korea

From the outset, ASEAN took starkly contrasting approaches to two of the most pressing regional security issues, namely the South China Sea disputes and the North Korean nuclear conundrum. This is unsurprising given the direct involvement

of ASEAN countries in the regional territorial maritime disputes and the lack thereof in the Korean Peninsula.

At the recently-concluded ASEAN Summit in Manila, ASEAN countries were initially unable to come to a consensus over whether to include in the Chairman's Statement references to "land reclamation and militarisation" activities in the disputed features of the South China Sea as well as the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling which had overwhelmingly favoured the Philippines against China. Eventually, neither topic was mentioned in the final version of the ASEAN Statement.

In contrast, ASEAN member states were able to come to an early consensus regarding the escalation of tensions in the Korean Peninsula. A day before the Summit, ASEAN foreign ministers had already issued a statement expressing "grave concern" over the situation in the Korean Peninsula, including North Korea's two nuclear tests last year and subsequent ballistic missile launches. This "grave concern" was reiterated in the Chairman's Statement.

In short, ASEAN leaders were able to easily and quickly agree on a common position regarding North Korea, but reaching a consensus on the South China Sea disputes appeared to be more challenging. Nevertheless, ASEAN countries were able to reconcile their differences and maintain a sense of unity in this milestone year which marks ASEAN's 50th anniversary.

Stronger Support on North Korea

What do the outcomes of the 30th ASEAN Summit mean for the upcoming meeting between ASEAN foreign ministers and Secretary of State Tillerson? For ASEAN, this 4 May meeting in Washington is an opportunity to share with the US why ASEAN remains important to American interests in the region and the positive role that ASEAN centrality can play to promote dialogue and cooperation among regional stakeholders.

From the US perspective, given the likelihood of a sixth nuclear test by North Korea, the Korean Peninsula will likely be higher on the US' agenda as compared to the South China Sea disputes. Tillerson will undoubtedly be pleased that ASEAN – of which many countries have good relations with North Korea – was able to decide on a clear and quick denunciation of North Korea's provocative behaviour.

The US could view this upcoming meeting as an opportunity to obtain even stronger support from the ten ASEAN countries to apply their own pressures and signals towards North Korea to dissuade Pyongyang from continuing on this vicious cycle.

From the ASEAN perspective, given that China appears to also be increasingly frustrated with North Korea's belligerence and rhetoric, this meeting could also be an opportune moment for ASEAN to express its common interest with both the US and China in trying to re-engage North Korea. ASEAN could step up its own efforts and play a more active role through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to get North Korea back on the path of negotiations over their nuclear and missile programmes.

This is especially so since the ARF remains the only multilateral meeting in the

region that North Korea is a member of along with the other parties involved in the now-dormant Six Party Talks.

Regarding the South China Sea disputes however, it is unlikely that the US and ASEAN can come to a strong agreement over the next course of action vis-à-vis China. Firstly, the ten ASEAN countries are still divided in their responses towards China. Secondly, the US might also not wish to push too hard on the South China Sea issue against China given its need for China's cooperation to rein in North Korea.

Moreover, the North Korea threat is certainly a more immediate concern for the US compared to the South China Sea disputes since the US' own security might be affected should North Korea successfully develop Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) capabilities in the future. Therefore, ASEAN and the US are unlikely to reach any major breakthrough or agreement over the South China Sea disputes in their upcoming meeting beyond a generally-worded statement.

ASEAN Will Have to Press its Relevance to US

Interestingly, US President Donald Trump's 100th day mark coincided with the 30th ASEAN Summit. Given Trump's transactional foreign policy approach, ASEAN will need to do more to highlight its relevance to the US as well as how Washington can benefit from engaging with ASEAN.

US Vice President Mike Pence had said in his recent visit to Jakarta that Trump is committed to attending the US-ASEAN and East Asia summits in the Philippines as well as the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Vietnam later this year. If ASEAN does not press or even prove its relevance to the US over the next several months, there is every possibility that Trump might renege on his promise of visiting Southeast Asia even in this highly significant 50th year of ASEAN's founding.

Should this occur, ASEAN might need to seriously re-evaluate its relationship with the present US administration amid questions about the Trump administration's commitment to the region.

Shawn Ho and Sarah Teo are Associate Research Fellows with the Regional Security Architecture Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. Sarah Teo is also a PhD candidate at the Department of Government and International Relations, University of Sydney. This was first published as a Channel News Asia commentary on 1 May 2017.
