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North Korea Threat: How Should ASEAN Respond?

By David Han

Synopsis

Although ASEAN should be concerned about the North Korean threat given the grave security implications to the wider Asia-Pacific region, ASEAN should be mindful of its actual raison d'être to avoid distorting its credentials and relevance in relation to the Korean Peninsula crisis.

Commentary

IN RECENT months, rising tensions due to North Korean threat have aroused anxiety throughout the Asia-Pacific, including Southeast Asia. In a letter to the ASEAN Secretary General dated 23 March 2017, North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-Ho indicated his “expectations that ASEAN which attaches great importance to the regional peace and stability will make an issue of the US-South Korean joint military exercises at ASEAN conferences”. He added that ASEAN should take a “fair position and play an active role in safeguarding the peace and safety of Korean Peninsula”.

In April 2017, during the 30th ASEAN Summit in the Philippines, ASEAN expressed “grave concern” and urged North Korea to comply with UN Security Council resolutions on its nuclear programme. ASEAN’s firm yet measured response to North Korea not only reflects international consensus against North Korea’s actions. It is also a neutral posture that avoids siding with any party involved in the crisis, including China and the United States. Additionally, ASEAN’s position neither overestimates the organisation’s ability to contribute to the resolution of the crisis nor misconstrues its existing purpose as a platform for shaping regional security.

Korean Peninsula as Conduit for ASEAN-US Ties?

RSIS researchers Shawn Ho and Sarah Teo have written in an RSIS Commentary on 2 May 2017 (“Strengthening ASEAN-US Relations: Korean Peninsula as Conduit?”) that “ASEAN could strengthen its regional security credentials by paying more attention to the challenge on the Korean Peninsula”. The rationale is that given the “current salience of the Korean Peninsula’s 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”.

Understandably, this argument raises the importance for ASEAN to urge the US to continue engaging Southeast Asia. This the US could do through existing regional arrangements that have been shaped by ASEAN multilateralism, rather than circumventing such established structures in dealing with security and geopolitical issues.

However, this proposal could be problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it is unclear how ASEAN would demonstrate its relevance to the US by dealing with the North Korean threat, when ASEAN already faces challenges in tackling geopolitical issues within the region. As ASEAN has faced difficulties in reaching consensus over a major geopolitical contention such as the South China Sea disputes, it is puzzling how ASEAN could be relevant to the US in tackling the Korean Peninsula crisis without first demonstrating its capacity to resolve Southeast Asia’s problematic maritime spats.

Risk of Widening ASEAN Divide

Secondly, ASEAN risks becoming divided between China and the US. During the recent meeting on 4 May 2017 in Washington DC, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson conveyed to ASEAN foreign ministers that Washington intends to stay engaged in Southeast Asia; he commended ASEAN as an “essential partner” to the US. Furthermore, in view of the Korean Peninsula crisis, Secretary Tillerson urged ASEAN to pressure North Korea by reviewing Pyongyang’s relations with ASEAN and curbing the country’s revenue flows from Southeast Asia.

However, should ASEAN draw too close to the US to condemn North Korea’s actions, China could perceive this as an attempt by Washington to complicate the dynamics of the Korean Peninsula crisis of which ASEAN is not directly involved.

Furthermore, ASEAN’s internal unity could be affected negatively. There are already indications that some member states are more inclined towards China while others gravitate towards the US. If ASEAN chooses sides regarding the North Korean threat, this could widen the intra-ASEAN divide because of differing attitudes towards the two powers.

ASEAN-China relations have been strained in recent years due to the South China Sea disputes which is still far from being resolved. Even though ASEAN would welcome US intentions to stay engaged in Southeast Asia, ASEAN would probably not risk aligning itself too closely with the US on the North Korea issue to avoid upsetting China unnecessarily.

Realism for ASEAN's Relevance

Thus, if ASEAN intends to show its relevance regarding the North Korean threat, it should be realistic about its own ability in offering viable solutions to the crisis, and avoid pandering to either China or the US. While ASEAN could do more by signalling to North Korea during the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meetings to back down from Pyongyang's provocative behaviour, beyond this there is not much that ASEAN could do to pressure North Korea to change its course.

In the past, ASEAN had issued similar statements on North Korea's brinksmanship. But North Korea has disregarded such regional criticisms and has continued with its nuclearisation drive unabated.

This is not to downplay ASEAN's importance as a regional organisation. Indeed, over the past few decades, ASEAN has played a key role in reducing the risk of conflict in the region through dialogue, consultation and consensus. It was even envisioned that ASEAN norms could have a wider influence on the security trajectory of the Asia-Pacific. The ARF was formed in 1994 for ASEAN and external stakeholders to discuss security issues and promote cooperative measures to enhance peace and stability in the region.

As the ARF is not meant to provide and enforce solutions to conflicts, ASEAN is limited in offering viable recommendations to both the US and China on the North Korean crisis. Nevertheless, in the long term, ASEAN should focus its efforts on developing the ASEAN Community to advance norm formulation and measures to promote peaceful consultation on security issues, and collective solutions to conflict prevention and resolution.

This would enhance ASEAN's standing not only as Southeast Asia's central regional institution capable of fronting peaceful and relevant alternatives to reduce tensions other than military tit-for-tat responses as witnessed in the Korean Peninsula. In the meantime, what ASEAN should do, and has done, is to continue in its unequivocal insistence that North Korea step down from its aggressive actions, and that all parties involved are to avoid further irritating each other.

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