

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

East Asia Summit 2018: Inclusion Is Best Way Forward

By Le Dinh Tinh

Synopsis

Inclusion may sound like a luxury concept in politics. Realities regarding Southeast Asia, however, suggest that inclusion helps bring the region to the desired outcome, especially in the long run.

Commentary

CAN ASEAN and its partners arrange a desirable regional security architecture amid the turbulence of today's power politics? If so, how? The thought-provoking topic of regional architecture building now must be juxtaposed with major powers' recent grand schemes, namely the United States' Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

From the perspective of small and medium-sized countries like those in ASEAN, there is no easy response to the above-mentioned questions. This has reminded ASEAN and other countries of a chronic problem: in an anarchic unpredictable and uncertain international system characterised by great power competition, lack of a supranational governing authority would make it hard to coordinate actions multilaterally. An open, inclusive architecture, however, would provide the best answer for the region going forward.

Last Standing Theory?

From the ASEAN-related meetings to bilateral mechanisms, from track-two diplomacy workshops to the heated public debate (and even the rise of nationalistic sentiments), small and medium-sized countries residing in the dynamic and complex Asia-Pacific region are more than ever concentrating their resources on winning strategies.

Which type of architecture then would bode well for the region – hegemonic stability, predictable bipolar order, concert of powers or power politics?

The world has seen times of great influence by a sole superpower, giving rise to the “hegemonic stability theory”, which suggests that if there is one strong leadership from the top, the world would be safer and more secure. To support an order with minimal number of poles, some argue a “predictable bipolar world” would also bring about more stability versus an “unpredictable multipolar world”.

Hegemonic, Unipolar or Bipolar World Better?

To the contrary, some would argue that small and medium-sized countries can enjoy more security and prosperity on the premise that all major powers treat each other like musicians in an orchestra. A concert of powers between major countries such as the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and India is possible because they all share a mutual set of vital interests from economic cooperation to world peace and security.

Another discourse has it that no matter a hegemon is in charge, or a group of major powers are in a concert or a balance of power, they would shape regional politics, security and prosperity anyway. By the rules of power politics, small and medium-sized countries have no choice but adapt themselves to hedging and balancing strategies and niche diplomacy.

For a number of reasons, the rise of populism and the current rivalry and competition between the US and China reinforces this line of thinking:

First, both unipolar or bipolar worlds have their pitfalls. The stability that these types of order promises demands no easy trade-offs. Small and medium-sized countries have to demonstrate either their loyalty to or the ability to walk the tight rope between major powers.

Even when one is in a hegemonic order, the propensity of the sole leader having challengers also put other countries at risk. In fact, the current superpower status of the US is not without question since China is catching up economically and in other fields.

Competition and Cooperation

Second, one cannot take for granted that major powers can work with each other for their common dividend. There was only one period starting from 1815 when the Congress of Vienna agreed that Austria, Great Britain, Russia, Prussia, and then France engaged in a balance of power whereby no country made any threat to the common peace.

Ambitious as it was, the Concert of Europe was continuously confronted by the nationalism in Europe, the reunification of Germany, and the resurgence in Italy. Finally this Congress system became void with the outbreak of the First World War.

The Sino-US relationship is characterised by competition and cooperation. In either

scenario, the rest of the international community has to follow the ups and downs of this relationship closely enough to avoid any adverse impact.

Interdependent World

Third, the world today is deeply interdependent as acknowledged by the World Economic Forum, the United Nations, governments, academic institutions, and businesses.

G20, with the new emerging powers such as Indonesia and South Africa and various similar groupings, testifies to the fact that major powers no longer can singlehandedly shape what the world is like. The FOIP and the BRI could not move forward without the reception and support of small and medium-sized countries.

This is a two-way street and an interactive exercise, not a unilateral imposition of will. And if one forgets the important roles of small and medium-sized countries, the national independence movements of the 1960s that swept every continent could help resurrect that historical evidence. Every nation has its own pride and capabilities.

Fourth, it is obvious that small and medium-sized countries have never given up their aspiration of further democratising international relations. They, in fact, always find the most sensible ways to raise their voices and coordinate actions.

Other great power challengers also seek to strengthen their international representation. For example, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5) have been asked by Brazil, India, Japan, and Germany to expand membership. Few countries are willing to stand outside the “great bargain” by major powers.

ASEAN's Place In A Changing World

Lastly, despite all the challenges, ASEAN and its institutions have demonstrated the ability to bring all the important stakeholders to the table.

The ASEAN Community, launched in 2015, is on its way to becoming one of the biggest economies in the world. Security-wise, at least, in the Asia Pacific region, ASEAN and its related mechanisms are pushing for cooperative transborder peace and security with ASEAN being the centre of the evolving architecture.

To date, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), though labelled by some as a talk shop, offers the only venue that discusses regional security from the South China Sea issue to the Korean peninsular to emerging threats. In the meantime, the East Asia Summit provides a significant forum for regional leaders to compare notes and discuss cooperative strategies.

Today the representation of regional politics is not confined to any fragmented club of countries. From a bottom-up viewpoint, many countries wish to serve as a friendship bridge, not a security buffer zone or a peripheral player even in the anarchic system.

When ASEAN leaders and their counterparts recently met again at the East Asia Summit in Singapore, they would have realised that if viewed top-down, only in an

inclusive, transparent and open architecture can regional countries enjoy more opportunities to promote connectivity, common security and prosperity. The antithesis to having lasting solutions as such is nothing other than exclusionary thinking. Lessons have been learned.

Le Dinh Tinh, PhD is Deputy Director General of the Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam. He contributed this specially to RSIS Commentary.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg