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US-China Conflict: Will ASEAN Centrality Be Derailed?

By Yang Razali Kassim

SYNOPSIS

The US-China trade war is fast escalating into a political one with security implications as US senators re-introduced a sanctions bill to check Beijing on its expansionism in the South China Sea and East China Sea. How will ASEAN be impacted?

COMMENTARY

ON 23 MAY 2019, the US Senate formally re-introduced a bill known as the South China Sea and East China Sea Sanctions Act. Its sponsors, a bipartisan group of 14 senators, say the bill is aimed at checking an expansive China which they describe as a “bully in both the South China Sea and East China Sea, encroaching on and intimidating its neighbours”.

Sweeping in scope, the legislation would “impose sanctions against Chinese individuals and entities that participate in Beijing's illegitimate activities to aggressively assert its expansive maritime and territorial claims in these disputed regions”. It is designed to send a clear signal that the Republicans and Democrats, despite their rivalry, were united behind the move to put a break on China’s growing expansion of its maritime territory and airspace in the South China Sea.

Good or Bad for ASEAN?

Coming amid a worsening trade war between the United States and China, the sanctions bill marks a new phase in the test of wills between a more militant US under Trump and a China seen emerging as a challenger to US hegemony.

First introduced in 2017 but not enacted, the timing of the bill suggests that in the Trump era, trade and economic tensions between the competing giants can, and will,

soon evolve into political and security clashes that could destabilise what the bill refers to as the Indo-Pacific region. If the South China Sea has been a flashpoint, the Senate bill will be a new turning point in the maritime disputes for ASEAN and for US-China relations. Caught in between, how will ASEAN handle this brewing imbroglio?

On the face of it, the US Senate bill seems to favour ASEAN. This latest US pressure on Beijing, one of several fronts, coincides with ASEAN's deep concern over China's unbridled expansionism in the South China Sea.

Southeast Asia has long been worried about China's growing assertiveness of its claim over what it sees as its historical waters -- a claim the international community has challenged politically, legally and successfully. But China does not seem bothered. The US Senate bill may escalate the pushback against China's territorial grab into a military conflict.

Not All Good

But there is a flipside that is also worrying ASEAN. For one, the Senate bill is likely to force China into a counter-response. When China does so, it will draw ASEAN deeper into divergent and divisive pulls which can tear the region apart, which it does not want. Not all of ASEAN are in favour of having the US in the region as a counterweight to China. Some may even want to exclude the US from the region.

For another, the US Senate bill actually comes a bit too late, and out of step with the times. Why so? China is now on a "good neighbour" trajectory, which is why Southeast Asia has of late seen some calm in the turbulent regional waters.

China is moving ahead with the Code of Conduct (COC) which had until recently been stuck in limbo. Beijing's strategy had been to frustrate ASEAN by doing nothing, except talk and talk about a "declaration" of conduct known for short as the "DOC".

One possible effect of the US Senate bill is therefore to re-harden China's position on the South China Sea disputes with the Southeast Asian claimants. This will complicate negotiations on resolving the discord with four ASEAN countries.

So the net effect of the US Senate bill will be to revive the flashpoint in the regional waters. This may boil over into China's economic relationships with those ASEAN countries that see Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a spur to their future economic growth. China will also see this as a setback for its flagship project and may retaliate.

All this will not be good for Southeast Asia. So, caught in a fix, ASEAN will have to re-strategise to survive. ASEAN will have to fall back, yet again, on its tried and tested but precarious balancing act known as "ASEAN Centrality".

ASEAN Centrality & ASEAN Unity

Rather than split in the face of a growing trade, economic and political war between the US and China, ASEAN's default position is to not take sides. It is a position that

gives ASEAN room to manoeuvre while it figures out how to manage the big-power rivalry in its backyard for its own enlightened self-interest.

There are not many platforms for the rivalling powers to converge on neutral ground. Thanks to years of skilful diplomacy, ASEAN has turned itself into a regional grouping that even competing giants see as useful for them in the global power game. That makes ASEAN relevant; relevance means influence.

ASEAN's strategy now, in the face of heightened tension, is to be even more central to everyone's interest – by remaining open and inclusive through its strategy of "ASEAN Centrality". One of its chief proponents is Singapore.

"When I say centre, I don't just mean that we are geographically at the centre," says Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan at a talk in Washington on 15 May 2019, "but philosophically, diplomatically and strategically, ASEAN remains at the centre of the Indo-Pacific area."

ASEAN Must Remain Standing as Balancer & Architect

But the fundamental premise of it all is a strong, united and cohesive ASEAN. In peacetime or volatile times, the regional bloc must guard against being torn apart by internal divisions caused by distracting loyalties to the competing powers. In a bifurcated world of rival blocs, says Dr Balakrishnan, ASEAN will be forced into making invidious choices which it does not want.

"Are we going to be split into two separate bandwagons on two different journeys, or will we continue this journey of integration, but on commonly accepted rules by consensus?"

To prevent all this from happening, no power should be allowed to dictate or lead ASEAN by the nose. No power should be excluded from the region either. Every power -- big, medium and small -- must have a place at the ASEAN table.

As the US and China manoeuvre for advantage, this latest twist in the South China Sea disputes will inevitably be hotly debated. As the defining issue of the 21st century, big power competition in the Asia Pacific will almost certainly dominate the coming Shangri-La Dialogue where the US acting defence secretary and the Chinese defence minister will be present.

For its own sake, ASEAN must ensure that its influential position as a balancer and geopolitical architect be further entrenched, not get derailed.

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