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Evolving Summit Dynamics: ASEAN Putting Its Foot Down?

By Joel Ng

SYNOPSIS

With delays to the signing of the RCEP, the 35th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok may not go down in history for remarkable achievements. However, it showed major external powers that they had to take the grouping seriously if they are to achieve their regional ambitions.

COMMENTARY

AS THE fanfare dies down on the ASEAN Summit and related Plus summits, major powers such as India and the United States will probably be disappointed in their assessment of what they managed to achieve at these meetings. The Bangkok high-level meetings may well temper recent talk about the squeezing of small ASEAN states amid great power rivalry – instead the script was flipped as ASEAN states pushed ahead with their own objectives.

India was singled out for the delay to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations that was hoped to be signed at the summit but there was a failure to break through. RCEP will now be signed next year, with or without India. Meanwhile, the US grabbed headlines for all the wrong reasons, as Donald Trump's non-attendance resulted in a reciprocal downgrading of attendance by ASEAN members who sent foreign ministers to the US-ASEAN Summit (with the exception of Vietnam and Thailand, the incoming and outgoing ASEAN chairs respectively, as well as the US-ASEAN coordinating country, Laos).

Major Power Missteps

None of these *faux pas* are the direct fault of ASEAN. While India may have domestic interests to contend with in agreeing to the RCEP, so too do all RCEP negotiating

states. It is not so simple for them to return to their domestic constituents with changes raised by another country, especially as populism has turned several trade policy areas such as immigration into political time bombs.

On the other hand, the US' criticism of China's actions in the South China Sea will have been largely ignored (albeit politely) by most ASEAN states who, even if they share those concerns, will be much keener on cooperation than antagonism.

Indeed, when ASEAN summits have been so deliberately taciturn and culturally sensitive to avoid embarrassment of any participant, the US' condemnation of China came across as discordant, and a sign that the US really is not listening to ASEAN, which has been begging for cooperation and non-confrontational dispute resolution.

Moreover, in preaching against 'might makes right' as the US accuses China of doing, it would not have escaped the delegates' notice that this is also how the US is renegotiating its trade deals: using its power to leverage concessions. It is difficult to take the US seriously when it has such a tone-deaf approach to regional affairs.

The US Summit Offer

The US' offer of an invitation to ASEAN to the US for a special summit was their own face-saving gesture but it is not such a simple matter to accept. Firstly, the optics of such a meeting would be terrible. It would not be ASEAN-centric, but US-centric, and no doubt will not be helped by Trump's tendency to try to make any official event all about himself. The other Plus countries would be absent, which could both raise suspicions and give ASEAN less room to manoeuvre.

Secondly, if it is attended by non-heads of state, would ASEAN be accused of snubbing the US? Conversely, if all ASEAN heads of state had to attend, would it make the optics even worse? Tributaries visiting the emperor is an image of particular sensitivity in this region.

Thirdly, if any one ASEAN member declines to attend (or sends a lower-ranking official), there may be an appearance of "choosing sides" or reducing ASEAN unity, that ASEAN members do not want to do. Given the anti-China message already delivered at the ASEAN-US Summit, what else would China interpret such a meeting to be?

ASEAN will have to weigh the benefits of going to Washington DC to deliver a message that they have already been making for the last three years – that of reaffirming ASEAN centrality, a commitment to a rules-based order, and maintaining an inclusive regional architecture – against the possibility that no one in Washington is actually listening to them. It is also unclear how Trump's transactional approach will work in an election year, since it depends on his election victory.

ASEAN's Leadership and Centrality at Stake

India, while it avoids joining RCEP at its inception and averts domestic opposition, will have no leverage to propose changes if it wishes to join later. While short term domestic politics appear to blow against trade agreements, the long term dynamics

are a certain disadvantage for India if it wants to be engaged with the region while it stays outside the region's rapidly-integrating market.

Perhaps the plain reading of the summit outcome is that two major external powers will go away disappointed with what they sought – ASEAN is accommodating within limits, but these limits are rapidly reached if members set out positions against each other. Moreover, even unilateral goals still require the cooperation of “small” ASEAN states to be successful. As these Plus powers devise their responses, ASEAN may yet be pulled again in different directions, but ASEAN will have been reaffirmed of its own strength when united at this summit.

ASEAN's centrality, reiterated in statement after statement following each meeting, is at stake because it is actions, not words, that maintain it. While ASEAN successfully gained acceptance of their new outlook on the Indo-Pacific by external partners, on more tangible goals such as the signing of RCEP and the avoidance of inflammatory discourse over the South China Sea, ASEAN was less successful.

If each of the major powers leaves with the impression that ASEAN can be ignored or worse, bullied into submission, then ASEAN's credibility will be hurt, and its ability to marshal the regional dynamics through its own institutions will suffer accordingly. That said, on balance, this summit may well be remembered as one when ASEAN, faced with external challenges to its own goals, began to push back.

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