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Biden-Xi: Emerging Clash of the United Fronts?

By Benjamin Tze Ern Ho

SYNOPSIS

As the Biden administration continues its diplomatic pressure on China, Beijing is likely to further harden its stance in response to what it perceives as a Western United Front against it. As the spectre of alliance politics emerges as the next frontier in major power competition, what would ASEAN's stance be?

COMMENTARY

SINCE THE days of the Cold War, the idea of non-alignment gave states a middle ground so as not chose between communist and capitalist blocs as they engaged in polarising ideological wars. Amidst this clash, countries in Southeast Asia mastered the art of neutrality.

The formation of ASEAN in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand was an attempt by the five countries to “hang together” so as not to be “hung separately” as the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union ensued. Indeed, the leaders of the five ASEAN states recognised a fundamental truth in their nascent nation-building: *to thrive, one must first survive*. Setting aside their differences, the leaders forged a working arrangement to ensure that the region would not come under undue influence from the superpowers.

Power Game: Enter China

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, its political ideology and economic model was discredited while the US model of liberal democracy and economic globalisation was held up as a blueprint for success. Put simply, countries that wanted to succeed and prosper had to look no further than America.

Washington's triumph over Moscow provided the strongest assurance and proof that it was on the right side of history, so the argument goes. For a while, it would seem that China's opening up of its economy following Deng Xiaoping's reforms demonstrated its preference for the Western model.

Coupled with the Sino-Soviet split and China's rapprochement with the US, many Westerners – not least policymakers in Washington – believed that it was a matter of time before increased engagement would result in China becoming more like the West. While the events of Tiananmen in 1989 represented a setback for human rights concerns, the overall feel was that China had more to gain by acquiescing to the West.

Indeed, the general thinking was that China was the greatest beneficiary of the liberal international order put in place by the US and it would be disingenuous of Beijing to challenge the very same order that engendered its rise and prosperity. Political scientists like Samuel Huntington and John Mearsheimer who suggested a darker vision of international relations were roundly criticised by others who felt that their view of human nature and the international system was too pessimistic and overly deterministic.

Shifting Configuration

Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew were one of the few voices who expressed the view that China would want to challenge the US as Beijing grew stronger. Most other leaders – particularly in Southeast Asia – either kept their views to themselves or were happy to go along with a generally sanguine view of China's rise, so long as it did not affect their own interests.

To be fair, China – under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao – was also careful not to overplay its hand, and largely abided by the dictum of "hide light, nourish obscurity" (*taoguangyanghui*) that Deng Xiaoping had promoted.

But as China's highly successful hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai Expo in 2010 showed, Beijing had grander aspirations; it would want to be a co-equal of the US, and not be contented as a lesser partner, however beneficial that partnership might have been.

The past decade under Xi Jinping has changed fundamentally Beijing's foreign policy playbook, and the consequences are most sharply felt in Southeast Asia. From the South China Sea disputes, to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Chinese influence operations, capitals in Southeast Asia face a much more assertive and ambitious China as never before.

More importantly however, this "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" as envisioned by Xi comes at a time when US durability and willingness to provide the global public goods have been questioned. Scholars like Australia's Hugh White and Singapore's Kishore Mahbubani have alluded to a more powerful China as an inevitable outcome and for the global system to reflect such shift in the configuration of power.

Return of Alliance Politics

According to David Shambaugh, competition between the US and China is now comprehensive, spanning all over the globe, and across multiple spheres, from technology to trade and territory. Exacerbating these tensions is the ongoing coronavirus pandemic in which vaccine diplomacy has taken centre stage.

President Biden's decision for further investigation into the origins of the coronavirus by his intelligence agencies has prompted Beijing to hit back with China's own accusations towards Washington. Notably, Biden's emphasis on "democracy" during the G7 meeting over the 11-13 June 2021 weekend in the United Kingdom would further provoke Beijing's ire; this was particularly so given the participation of other Asian countries like South Korea and Japan, both which are seen as vital players in the Northeast Asia geopolitical theatre.

Hence, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi's convening of the 7 June meeting with his Southeast Asian counterparts in Chongqing shortly before the G7 summit represented Beijing's effort to further cultivate ASEAN. This is not unlike Biden's promotion of ties with the G7, although this was done in the context of the celebration of the 30th anniversary of China-ASEAN dialogue relations.

Likewise, China's emphasis on cooperation (between ASEAN and China) can be seen as a counterpoint to the US call on democracy. Indeed, as these events have illustrated, both Washington and Beijing are attempting to cultivate alliances – however imperfect. In the case of the G7, the driver was the spread of democratic values, and for Southeast Asian countries, the economic model of cooperation, which included elevating ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership.

Southeast Asia and Clash of the United Fronts

While countries would ultimately make decisions based on their own national interests, it is likely that the US and China would want to carve out a "united front" of like-minded allies as opposed to going against each other directly. This is where the challenge for Southeast Asian states would be.

Indeed vaccine diplomacy has already generated some debates among Southeast Asian states regarding the implications of vaccine choices on their foreign policy and political alignment. It is unlikely that the non-alignment playbook can be conveniently revived to address the geopolitical rivalry between the US and China.

What would neutrality mean in the current coronavirus-fuelled international environment? Countries in Southeast Asia would have to consider carefully their interests and priorities if they are to navigate wisely the prospect of alliance politics.

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