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Region at a Crossroads: ASEAN Centrality Needs Traction

By Lawrence Anderson

SYNOPSIS

US-China relations are at their most critical point since rapprochement 50 years ago. It leaves ASEAN states vulnerable to significant pressure from both superpowers to choose sides. If ASEAN can stand firm, it is best placed to take on the challenging task of encouraging China and the US to build trust and manage their differences peacefully.

COMMENTARY

US-CHINA relations are at their most critical point since rapprochement 50 years ago. Over the last several weeks, US and Chinese defence and foreign policy officials separately engaged in a flurry of diplomatic activity with their Asian and South Pacific counterparts.

The aim: to win friends and allies to their respective strategic narratives. Despite the ongoing war in Ukraine, Sino-US competition remains the key concern in the Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific. The recently concluded Shangri-la Dialogue (SLD) in Singapore has reinforced this perception.

US-China Collision Course: ASEAN Dilemmas

As US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin and Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe laid out their respective national positions on Taiwan, the East China Sea, South China Sea, North Korea, and the war in Ukraine, it left some analysts to conclude that America and China continue to be on a collision course that could end in open hostilities.

On an optimistic note, however, the SLD enabled both men to meet face-to-face for

the first time and despite policy differences, they agreed to continue their dialogue at future meetings. Underpinning their strong words in public, the two delegations know they cannot overreach. Both outcomes have presented ASEAN with dilemmas.

Firstly, all ASEAN countries want substantive ties and active cooperation with both Beijing and Washington and not have to choose sides. *Secondly*, while the US and China have reiterated that they have no intention of forcing ASEAN countries to choose sides, the reality is starkly different.

Thirdly, the US and China stress that they continue to strongly support ASEAN Centrality, but their respective actions so far bring no meaningful impact on that mantra, and ASEAN does not come across as a cohesive grouping serving Southeast Asia's neutrality and role as an honest broker in big-power rivalry.

Need for Mindset Change

Yet, ASEAN is best placed to take on the challenging task of building on what the SLD has shown to be the way forward to encourage China and the US as well as their friends and allies in the region to engage in substantive dialogue to build trust and manage their differences peacefully.

As Professor Tommy Koh of Singapore eloquently put it: ASEAN's fondest wish is for America and China to stop quarrelling and learn to work together for the stability and prosperity of the region. Going forward, this requires a mindset change of all parties.

A strong, united, and even-handed ASEAN is of better value to both China and the US. There are so many transboundary issues of the 21st century which the two superpowers can utilise ASEAN to bridge and connect, and to enable productive co-existence and developmental progress.

Climate change is a reality which needs more cooperation and joint action. New communicable diseases, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, threaten public health globally in an unprecedented manner.

Digitalisation of international trade and investment flows requires new standards of management. The urgency to re-learn how best to work strategically on the common challenges facing humanity is more compelling with each passing day.

ASEAN Centrality Needs Traction

Therefore, considerable effort must be exerted by ASEAN leaders collectively to give traction to the centrality of ASEAN as a foundation for the ASEAN Community and its ability to strengthen regional peace and to increase prosperity for the people of the region.

By most reliable estimates, ASEAN will be in the top quartet of the world's economies by 2030, a short eight years away. This means a significant clout in the global economy. ASEAN can play an important role in preserving stability and security. It is necessary to quickly move beyond the rhetoric of a strong, united, and successful ASEAN.

Firstly, ASEAN countries need to decide what they are prepared to do together, as well as what they are not prepared to do with the big powers. Then, communicate this clearly to their Dialogue Partners (which include all the big powers).

It need not entail forging an ASEAN consensus on all issues. But it does mean agreeing on areas where ASEAN member states must stand firmly together despite intense outside pressure to do things unilaterally.

In the past, ASEAN was able to achieve significant outcomes by taking positions based on the collective good of all its members and resisting the urge to resort always to positions based solely on the respective national interests.

To be a credible and respected organisation, ASEAN must agree to uphold the principles enshrined in the UN Charter, ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation -- signed by more than 40 countries so far, including the US, China and Russia.

ASEAN should work closely with its Dialogue Partners to abide by principles that support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states; the freedom to make decisions as independent countries; not using force to settle differences; and respect for non-interference in the internal affairs of all nations.

Region at a Crossroads: Send Clear Message to Big Powers

Secondly, ASEAN must send the clear message to all big powers that ASEAN member states want them to stay engaged in the region, but in positive ways that benefit all. For ASEAN's Dialogue Partners, the message should be to continue bilateral assistance to individual member states, but also contribute substantially to region-wide initiatives.

Key ones include completing the proposed Code of Conduct in the South China Sea; cooperation to address problems afflicting the Mekong sub-region; combatting pandemics; and environmental protection.

Thirdly, ASEAN has the relevant regional security mechanisms and platforms to enable their leaders and senior officials to meet collectively with their counterparts from and beyond the region to share candid views on relevant issues and challenges.

Specifically, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM)-Plus, and East Asia Summit (EAS) have been useful to leaders and policy makers in offering different perspectives and various forms of inclusive engagements.

They also serve to build trust and enable participants to engage in substantial and robust discussions rather than scripted speeches per se. Continuing to do this regularly and purposefully will reinvigorate the ARF, ADMM-Plus and EAS significantly.

The countries of the Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific stand at a crossroads. It will take a concerted effort by all parties if the region is to continue its trajectory to peace, progress, and prosperity. ASEAN and its like-minded partners should work closely to

persuade all parties to focus on strengthening and using ASEAN for an enduring peace and security for all.

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