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China's Global Security Initiative: Implications for ASEAN

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SYNOPSIS

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs recently released a concept paper on its proposed Global Security Initiative. The paper not only demonstrates China's ambitions to take on a greater leadership role in security matters across the world, but more fundamentally, its intention to challenge the US-led order. What are the implications for ASEAN?

COMMENTARY

On 21 February 2023, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a [concept paper](#) on its proposed Global Security Initiative (GSI). The paper essentially showcased Beijing's wide-ranging ambitions to lead a wholly new security framework on its own terms. Prior to that, the same ministry published a [commentary](#) titled "US Hegemony and Its Perils". The commentary launched a blistering attack on US foreign policy since the country's founding, not just against American defence and foreign policies but also economic and socio-cultural ones.

A Blueprint for China's Global Security Ambitions

The concept paper focused on China's plans to cooperate with various regional organisations and mechanisms on a variety of critical security areas, including information security, counter-terrorism, and food security. It insisted on openness and inclusiveness, creditably highlighting China's aim of cooperating with regional organisations in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Central Asia. However, it clearly precluded collaboration with the United States and its allies and partners, save

for a minor point on supporting “cooperation among China, Africa, and Europe on small arms and light weapons control under the premise of respecting the will of Africa.”

The paper failed to mention cooperation with Western-led organisations. The European Union (EU) and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) were not highlighted, let alone the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) which is now embroiled in sharp tensions with Russia over its invasion of Ukraine. Instead, the paper warns: “the Cold War mentality, unilateralism, bloc confrontation and hegemonism contradict the spirit of the UN Charter and must be resisted and rejected” – a clear reference to what Beijing perceives as a hostile position taken by Washington and its allies against China and its close partners.

That, together with the scathing commentary against the United States, paints a picture of Beijing’s resolve to resist US influence worldwide. It also highlights China’s determination to undermine the current order – which Beijing sees as [unjust](#) – and offer an alternative security order led by China.

Such ambitions would clearly affect Southeast Asia, given the proximity of the region to China. However, Beijing has to consider that several ASEAN countries retain close relations with the United States. The Philippines, in particular, has been ramping up security relations with [Washington](#) and [Tokyo](#), much to [Beijing’s anger](#). Given the longstanding security ties between the United States and these ASEAN countries, China is unlikely to be able to fully expunge US presence from Southeast Asia in the near future.

What’s in Store for ASEAN?

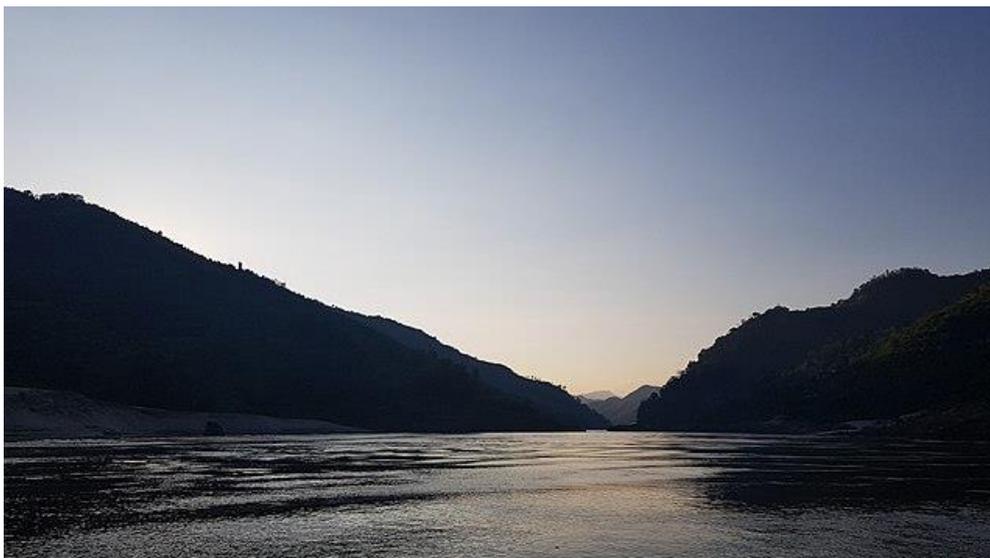
The concept paper provided a brief paragraph on ASEAN, which was short on details. It called for the support of ASEAN-centred regional security cooperation mechanisms and adherence to the ASEAN way of consensus-building. This support for ASEAN is simply a continuation of China’s [proclamations](#) backing ASEAN Centrality. However, this masks the fact that ASEAN divisions, in the context of the bloc’s consensus-making mechanisms, actually work in China’s favour, as some of its close partners in ASEAN could be counted on to act as “spoilers” in any decision made collectively by the bloc.

Yet, the concept paper said nothing about how Beijing will handle the thorniest issue between China and Southeast Asia: the South China Sea disputes, as well as ongoing negotiations over the code of conduct. China has recently [asserted](#) that it will continue to “properly handle maritime disputes with countries directly concerned ... through dialogue and consultation, and work with ASEAN countries to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea.” This suggests that China would only be willing to deal with the claimant countries [bilaterally](#) in managing the disputes, though it would be more amenable to work with all ASEAN members for the broader aims of maintaining peace and security in the area. This approach towards the South China Sea – which also involves exploiting [divisions](#) among ASEAN member states so that no strong position against China can emerge – is at odds with the spirit of the concept paper, or its professed support for ASEAN Centrality and unity.

Other actions that China has taken further contradict its statement in the concept paper, which affirmed that China would promote the accommodation of Beijing’s and ASEAN’s “comfort level to further strengthen security dialogue and cooperation among regional countries.” With the enactment of its [Coast Guard Law](#) in early 2021, Beijing effectively gave its coast guard the right to use force against perceived encroachments in the South China Sea. At the same time, Beijing has not ceased to aggressively enforce its claims, as more recent maritime [incidents](#) between China and the Philippines show. Indeed, during the 12th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Phnom Penh last August, then Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [reiterated](#) that Beijing’s claims on the South China Sea are “supported by solid historical and legal basis”, all while denouncing US interference in the area.

What the concept paper did call for was the promotion of cooperation under the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) mechanism. This is noteworthy as it demonstrates Beijing’s burgeoning interest in the Mekong River sub-region. The river not only flows through China but also through five other ASEAN countries, two of which – [Cambodia](#) and [Laos](#) – are considered to be China’s close partners. Given China’s dominance of the LMC through [permanent co-chairmanship](#), observers see the LMC as Beijing’s means to [challenge or even replace](#) similar regional mechanisms, such as the Mekong River Commission – the [development partners of which include](#) the United States and some of its allies such as Australia and Japan – as well as the Mekong-US Partnership.

Notably, the concept paper also called for the fostering of a GSI “pilot zone”. During the 7th LMC Foreign Ministers’ Meeting held in July last year, Mr Wang similarly [proposed](#) a “pilot zone” for China and the five Mekong River countries. Neither the concept paper nor Mr Wang provided further elaboration on what this entails. However, given the geographic scope and China’s likely dominance of the “pilot zone”, the proposal has the potential to increase China’s influence over the Mekong River countries, as well as sharpen the divisions between some of these countries and the maritime ASEAN ones.



The Mekong River runs through China and five other ASEAN countries, including Cambodia and Laos. China's call for the increased cooperation on the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) and the fostering of a “pilot zone” for the Mekong River countries point to its burgeoning interest in the Mekong River sub-region. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

In light of ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making mechanisms, the above developments portend a more divided ASEAN that would become inert and be unable to take any ownership of regional security affairs. This has adverse implications for ASEAN Centrality, as ASEAN would no longer be in the driver's seat when managing these issues. Such an outcome, however, would be good enough for Beijing, rather than the remote goal of comprehensive removal of Washington's influence from the region.

Keeping ASEAN Centrality

China's ambitions do not bode well for ASEAN. Indeed, the bloc must exercise political will to coordinate over critical security matters and maintain proactive stewardship over them, rather than let any major power – be it the United States or China – sow divisions among member states and render ASEAN ineffective. ASEAN's coordination efforts must go beyond mere discussions, important as these may be.

It now falls on the current ASEAN chair, Indonesia, to skilfully manage the bloc's security relations with both Washington and Beijing. In addition, ASEAN needs to collectively seek greater clarity from China regarding the GSI's ambit in Southeast Asia – particularly its proposed "pilot zone" – and effectively coordinate responses to the GSI among member states. Only by doing so will ASEAN be able to maintain its centrality in the face of China's burgeoning ambitions in the region.

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