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Relevance of ASEAN in a Shifting Global Environment

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SYNOPSIS

Increasing strategic competition among major powers poses a challenge to ASEAN unity and ASEAN Centrality. ASEAN must refurbish and strengthen its existing mechanisms as it strives to maintain the organisation's relevance in multilateralism and the rules-based international order, and to consolidate the growth, prosperity, and security of individual member states.

COMMENTARY

The economic and security architecture in the region Singapore is most directly involved in has evolved alongside shifts in the global system. The spirit of regional cooperation has become more demanding and yet indispensable.

The widening socio-economic and political divides both within and between countries necessitate a refinement of strategy by individual states and regional organisations. In many countries, the mood is to go it alone and to unilaterally push for their own interests against the value of mutual give-and-take in a rules-based international order.

Tensions between the United States and China have continued with the two major powers exchanging barbs over Taiwan and the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is often judged by the scope of its ability to remain united in the face of rivalries in its backyard, especially as the world shifts away from a bipolar to multipolar order. As the world shifts to a multipolar order, ASEAN needs to earnestly look into improving its institutions and mechanisms to address difficult questions, such as continuing economic integration, managing the challenges of climate governance, coping with digitalisation, and navigating big-power rivalries.

Domestically, the success of ASEAN member states in education and poverty reduction means greater pressure to achieve inclusive development in the areas of democratisation, digitalisation, and diplomacy, amongst others.

Geopolitical Trends Impacting ASEAN

Global developments such as the war in Ukraine and Gaza, the Myanmar crisis, US-China contestation in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, and the new so-called “minilateralism”, bring into question the value and relevance of ASEAN. There is a perception that ASEAN seems to be stuck. ASEAN norms, particularly that of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, are deemed by certain quarters to be a barrier to ASEAN regional order in the 21st century. However, despite being a consensus-seeking organisation, ASEAN has emerged as the premier organisation in Southeast Asia even though its ASEAN Way has some negative effects.

ASEAN has survived various crises in its early history, owing largely to the advantages of its strategic location and a structure which is flexible and purpose specific. ASEAN's leadership has often faced crises that required it to think up a workable arrangement. For example, when ASEAN decided to establish an ASEAN Community in 2003, there were differences in opinion among ASEAN member states about the timing of such an initiative, and even doubts whether ASEAN could achieve more as a community based on the three pillars of political/security cooperation, economic integration, and socio-cultural development. In fact, 56 years of ASEAN has given it a collective experience which cannot be under-rated nor dispensed with.

Today, deteriorating US-China relations have complicated traditional ASEAN diplomacy, threatening to split ASEAN along the fault lines created by its member states' external relations. The consequences of a rupture would not only be economic but strategic. ASEAN must maintain its strategic relevance in managing the regional architecture. It needs to develop a viable public position straddling the competitive dynamics between China and the US. These two major powers have accepted that ASEAN has a central role to play, and they need ASEAN support for their respective initiatives in the region.

ASEAN therefore exudes a strategic value which cannot be disregarded by powerful states outside Southeast Asia. The challenge is how to update ASEAN mechanisms urgently.

ASEAN needs a fresh narrative to keep itself in the centre of this fluid situation and to stay relevant as a valued partner and interlocutor for the major powers. Its focus on maintaining a robust digital economy and its acknowledgement of the shift in nomenclature from Asia Pacific to Indo-Pacific help the grouping to reinforce its strategic relevance and to balance the interests of major powers in the region.

As the digital economy is expected to add an estimated US\$1 trillion to the region's GDP by 2025, ASEAN launched the first major region-wide digital economy agreement in the world – the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA). ASEAN is also pushing to concretise and operationalise the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) to actively project ASEAN Centrality in the evolving Indo-Pacific concept.

Implications for ASEAN Centrality

ASEAN needs to refurbish its existing mechanisms to stay relevant in an increasingly uncertain world. ASEAN cannot do this without unity of purpose and a common vision in strengthening its collective value. The key approach going forward is to reassert its centrality in Southeast Asian development and progress, in tandem with the commitment of respective member states to avoid being swayed by the strategic ambitions of external powers.

ASEAN became “central” because it was useful and relevant at the material time to states, big and small, in and out of Southeast Asia. But ASEAN Centrality has been undermined over time by organisational complacency, and, crucially, by insufficient socialisation among its member states with ASEAN’s strategic relevance, usefulness and vision. The annual rotation of the ASEAN Chair also gives rise to different policy weightage and utilisation, and the distortion and muddling of ASEAN Centrality by powerful external actors, the media, and even ASEAN officials themselves, contribute to the cynicism in Southeast Asian policy circles.

ASEAN member states must pay active attention to ASEAN Centrality in their respective policy development and domestic agenda where the ASEAN concept is now often absent. As of now, the following give us an indicator of where ASEAN stands among its member states and across the region:

- (i) increasingly, all the ASEAN member states, including Myanmar, accept that there is a need for ASEAN – more strongly in some areas and less willingly in others;
- (ii) across the region, the terms “ASEAN” and “ASEAN community-building” seem to be acknowledged by more and more levels of society, i.e., the member states and their respective populations;
- (iii) it is accepted that ASEAN has established specific baselines for interaction with the powers outside Southeast Asia, and the consistency and fortitude in applying the established principles and vision have helped ASEAN to build up a credible, enduring and enviable relationship with all its external partners; and
- (iv) ASEAN continues to be very positive about multilateralism even though at times the multilateral approach proves to be turbulent across certain domains.

Moving forward, the indication has shown that ASEAN is maturing as a regional organisation. The notion and application of ASEAN Centrality may be a work in progress but there is no rolling back this key strategic asset of engagement. There will always be challenges faced in functioning as a consensus-seeking diverse grouping of 10 countries (11 when Timor-Leste formally joins ASEAN), each with its own specific type of government, economy, and society. It is unrealistic to expect otherwise. ASEAN may not be able to solve all problems, but it knows how to manage the difficulties that come its way.

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