



REPORT

Southeast Asian perspectives on US–China competition

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ASEAN CENTRALITY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

EVAN A LAKSMANA¹

ASEAN member states' incoherent responses to the July 2016 ruling by the international arbitral tribunal in *Philippines v China*, as well as the near failure of the group's foreign ministers to agree to a joint communiqué on the issue at their meeting two weeks later, has led critics to once again question ASEAN's centrality to the regional institutional architecture. Some have even argued, for example, that deference to ASEAN places US strategic objectives at the mercy of ASEAN's confused institutional strategic vision.² After all, the member states' different geopolitical and national interests will always present challenges for ASEAN's ability to act as a coherent regional actor.

If ASEAN member states will always have divergent interests — which has allowed China to drive a strategic wedge between them on a regular basis regarding the South China Sea — should we then dismiss the notion of ASEAN centrality altogether?

WHAT IS ASEAN CENTRALITY?

We should be clear about what ASEAN centrality is and is not. For one thing, centrality is not interchangeable with or equivalent to consensus, particularly if the latter is defined solely in terms of complete unanimity on all regional challenges at all times. When observers raise the bar for centrality in this manner, as seen in the South China Sea in particular, signs of dissent are often interpreted as indicative of the organisation's growing irrelevance.³

For another, ASEAN consensus is in fact only one of the preconditions for, or pathways towards, centrality. After all, as defined by the ASEAN Charter, centrality is the notion that ASEAN should be the “primary driving force” in shaping the group's external relations in a regional

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² Taylor Wettach, “Don't Count on ASEAN to Save the South China Sea”, *The National Interest*, 10 August 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/dont-count-asean-save-south-china-sea-17309>.

³ Matthew Davies, “ASEAN Centrality Losing Ground”, *East Asia Forum*, 4 September 2016, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/09/04/asean-centrality-losing-ground/>.

architecture that is open, transparent, and inclusive.⁴ Centrality is therefore not an outcome, or some end-state to run towards. It is the run itself — an ongoing process of continuous engagements with external partners. Of course, if you are running as a group, it is preferable that there is consensus on how fast the pace should be and where the finish line is. In other words, it is not a question of whether ASEAN is central, but to what extent and how.

If we can now understand ASEAN centrality as a process, we should also consider what consensus actually implies. When we consider the broader history of ASEAN’s decision-making processes, diplomatic culture, and the rise of the so-called ‘ASEAN way’, then consensus does not always imply unanimity of position — particularly if it is only narrowly defined by joint statements.⁵ Sometimes consensus can be an agreement to disagree — not necessarily a stark choice between ‘agree on all words’ or ‘no statement at all’.

After all, not only did ASEAN members put the “ASEAN Minus X” principle in the ASEAN Charter as a formula for “flexible participation” (Article 21), but some of the group’s strategic successes have happened via informal mechanisms without unanimous public statements.⁶ So unanimity of position in joint statements should not be the all-important benchmark of centrality. In fact, as Satu Limaye argues, we need to avoid “ASEANology”, the parsing of each ASEAN gathering’s developments and communiqués regarding the South China Sea, altogether.⁷

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Yet, while centrality is an ongoing process, it was originally ‘granted by default’ during the post-Cold War strategic uncertainty in which distrust, disengagement, and rivalry permeated relations between regional powers (mainly the United States, Japan, and China). As Lee Jones has argued, ASEAN’s centrality in managing great power relations then correlated with the incapacity of great powers to successfully mediate their relations on their own.⁸ In other words, centrality was initially ‘given’

⁴ See Article 1 of the *Charter of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations* (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, January 2008), <http://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf>.

⁵ On these longer trends, see for example Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (London: Routledge, 2001); Jürgen Haacke, *ASEAN’s Diplomatic and Security Culture: Origins, Development and Prospects* (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁶ According to Article 21 of the ASEAN Charter, “in the implementation of economic commitments, a formula for flexible participation, including the ASEAN Minus X formula, may be applied where there is a consensus to do so”. This formula, in other words, allows ASEAN to move ahead on economic integration projects or commitments even if there is no unanimous agreement on certain policies.

⁷ Satu Limaye, “Why ASEAN Is Here to Stay and What That Means for the US”, *The Diplomat*, 30 August 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/08/why-asean-is-here-to-stay/>.

⁸ Lee Jones, “Still in the ‘Drivers’ Seat’, But for How Long? ASEAN’s Capacity for Leadership in East-Asian International Relations”, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 29, No 3 (2010), 95–113.

...ASEAN now needs to earn centrality, not just inherit it.

to ASEAN because it was the best neutral alternative and by the 1990s had done relatively well in regional affairs.

This historical context of centrality often led to a sense of self-congratulatory complacency among ASEAN member states, but as polarising issues such as the South China Sea suggest, increasing the degree of centrality can only happen through strong and sustained leadership from within ASEAN. Put differently, ASEAN now needs to earn centrality, not just inherit it. After all, as ASEAN has historically 'operationalised' centrality by acting as the convener for regional forums such as the East Asia Summit, the strategic flux instigated by China's rise means that ASEAN might become nothing more than an event organiser rather than a regional playmaker.

WHAT CAN ASEAN DO IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA?

If we understand ASEAN centrality as an ongoing process of engagement with external powers — from China to the United States — and that the concept historically meant convening regional multilateral meetings, what should we reasonably expect of the group with regards to the South China Sea? The answer is: that depends. At a time when conceptual confusions plague sound policy analysis, recalibrating expectations based on the limits and promises of ASEAN is a responsible option.

However, before we can understand ASEAN's possible role in the South China Sea, we should first break down the issue into three policy areas: dispute resolution, tension management, and pragmatic de-escalation steps. These three areas represent long-term, medium-term, and short-term policy challenges, respectively. On the first, a final, legally binding resolution of maritime delimitations and territorial disputes under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea cannot occur without bilateral negotiations between the claimant states (China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Philippines, and possibly Taiwan). ASEAN cannot and should not be expected to resolve the South China Sea disputes in this sense.

The second element, tension management, is a key — though certainly not the only — prerequisite for dispute resolution in the South China Sea. That is to say, without stable, peaceful, and legitimate tension management mechanisms, a final resolution to the dispute might be harder to attain. This is the strategic value of the ASEAN–China framework, realised through the implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and ongoing communication and engagement through the Code of Conduct (CoC) processes. There is no other regional mechanism that involves regular, albeit slow, negotiations to legally regulate behaviours in the area that includes all the claimants in a multilateral setting. A regional tension management mechanism that excludes ASEAN and involves only the

region's great powers would be subject to changing geopolitical interests, not to mention stronger domestic political impulses, and lack an institutionalised pathway to sustained engagement.

In this regard, great power cooperation, primarily between the United States and China, is more suitable to short-term de-escalation policies and strategies. Whether we agree on the 'root causes' of the current cycle of escalation in the East and South China Seas, observers generally consider the pre-2009 period to have been relatively stable, even in disputed parts of the region. Short-term political and diplomatic deals — whether public or not — should be useful to at least take us back to that period. While many are sceptical about the prospects for China rolling back its militarisation of artificial islands, for example, or the United States scaling back its freedom of navigation operations, only creative diplomatic strategies can de-escalate the current situation. In this sense, without de-escalatory steps, a regional tension management mechanism through an ASEAN–China framework would be harder to achieve.

Breaking down the issue of the South China Sea into these policy areas allows us to recalibrate expectations about what ASEAN can or cannot achieve, rather than rehashing futile 'glass half-full, half-empty' debates.

First, regional resources — diplomatic, financial, and political — should be aligned accordingly. If external powers want ASEAN to regain centrality (and not be divided among themselves), then they should stop their divisive behaviours and talk to each other about how to de-escalate the situation. In this regard, discussions between Washington and Beijing are paramount, not just for the purposes of better managing their own strategic rivalry and cooperative dynamics but also because the United States and China could influence other ASEAN members. Meanwhile, the ASEAN–China CoC process should be supported as a way to temporarily manage the tension before the environment is suitable for direct bilateral talks on maritime delimitation. However, the recent rapprochement between Manila and Beijing and the beginning of bilateral negotiations between them — if sustained — could render the CoC process moot or unnecessary.

Second, for ASEAN to thrive in its engagement with external powers, whether on the South China Sea or other issues, we cannot rely on the nature of the group's rotational chairmanship. Not only do differing domestic priorities result in different foreign policy positions, but often the nature of the individual regimes and their democratic processes, or the lack thereof, mean that different heads of state have wildly different ideas about ASEAN. This is exacerbated by the fact that ASEAN's 'founders generation' is gone, and the current and emerging elite may have less of a commitment to ASEAN's centrality and the projects that support it, or are limited in their ability to push them through.⁹ Indonesia's

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⁹ Limaye, "Why ASEAN Is Here to Stay and What That Means for the US".

leadership, in this regard, is critical. As former Indonesian Deputy Foreign Minister Dino Patti Djalal recently noted, “ASEAN centrality needs to be earned and thus it is important for [Jakarta] to take the lead”.¹⁰

Third, regardless of whether or not external powers can be relied on to de-escalate tensions, ASEAN should better implement its own integration commitments, particularly through the ASEAN Community framework built upon three pillars (political-security community, economic community, and socio-cultural community). Only by ensuring that the political and economic development gaps are narrowed between ASEAN member states (particularly Laos and Cambodia, for example) can we hope to prevent great powers from dividing the group, and perhaps ensure that consensus can be better managed and achieved.

Finally, what should Washington expect? Under President Obama, engagement with ASEAN was an uncontroversial way through which the United States could pursue its ‘pivot’ or ‘rebalance’ strategy. After all, ASEAN’s community projects were beneficial for US businesses and the various ASEAN-led institutions (from the ASEAN Regional Forum to ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus) offered platforms to articulate US-backed international rules and norms.¹¹ Additionally, while ASEAN should not be expected to ‘solve’ the South China Sea disputes, it could — given proper strategic investment — productively manage regional tension and strengthen rules-based regional architecture.

Under President Trump, however, these benefits will be lost in the new administration’s regional calculus. Not only will Trump’s penchant for bilateralism effectively sideline ASEAN, but the ideologically skewed world view of his advisers over rivalry with China will further downgrade Southeast Asia’s strategic value. Consider, for example, the fact that Trump has pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and his administration’s confrontational rhetoric about China and the South China Sea. Thus, while Southeast Asia has assumed for over two decades that China’s rise was the region’s greatest strategic challenge, America’s spiralling uncertainty under Trump might now be the biggest question mark.

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¹⁰ Marguerite Afra Sapiie, “As ASEAN’s ‘Natural Leader’, Indonesia Should Assert Leadership”, *The Jakarta Post*, 18 September 2016, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2016/09/18/as-aseans-natural-leader-indonesia-should-assert-leadership.html>.

¹¹ Limaye, “Why ASEAN Is Here to Stay and What That Means for the US”.

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