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ASEAN Security Architecture: Tension between National Interests and Regional Institutions

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Benjamin Ho, Associate Research Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore, explains that “Only if Beijing is able to persuade that China’s national interests do not run contrary to those of ASEAN can an enduring and amicable relationship be forged.”

Following the 49th ASEAN Ministers’ Meeting in Vientiane in July, the conspicuous absence of any mention of the Permanent Court of Arbitration’s (PCA) legal ruling on the South China Sea was viewed by many as a diplomatic victory for China, as much as it was perceived as a lack of political will among ASEAN leaders to forge consensus amidst regional territorial disputes. Calls for ASEAN to reform its consensus-forging mechanism to prevent one or two countries affecting the overall regional process, have been made by a number of scholars – and mooted even within and among regional governments. Such proposals, however, are problematic in a number of ways, not least of all in their understanding of how diplomatic actions and national interests intertwine and are being played out within the regional theatre. More crucially, it misreads the nature of international politics, the objectives and goals of the ASEAN grouping, as well as the interplay between domestic prerogatives and foreign policy.

The primacy of national interests in international politics

Scholars of international relations have long argued that national interests are accorded pride of place in how countries define and make their foreign policy. To this end, the survival of a country is at stake, or as Hans Morgenthau puts it, “the protection of physical, political and cultural identity against encroachments by other nation states.” Seen this way, the actions of Cambodia in opposing any mention of the PCA’s ruling in a joint communique, have been criticized by many as “selling out to China”. Yet, this should not be surprising given Cambodia’s strategic calculations regarding its own national interests: China’s economic might is too tempting and imposing to ignore.

From this vantage point, the Philippines’ position can be equally understood: its long-term interests lie with allying itself with the United States. While China’s economic ties with the Philippines are not insignificant (about 10 per cent of the country’s exports go to China), its economic relations with the United States and Japan – both treaty allies – are greater, comprising more than 35 per cent of its exports. Even more, its security concerns about China’s territorial ambitions mean that the United States, and to a lesser extent, Japan, remain indispensable in limiting Beijing’s actions. While a number of Filipino diplomats have attempted to play down Washington’s influence in its territorial disputes with China, it is highly inconceivable that Manila would act alone in its high profile contest with Beijing, given the huge disparity in geopolitical influence and military power between the two countries.

Whither regional cooperation?

If one takes the premise of national interests as the starting point for international politics, then what can be said about multilateral cooperation, in particular the ASEAN mode of consensus-forging? Is it a project that is destined to fail, as a number of critical scholars have pointed out in recent years? The answer is both yes and no.

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Given that ASEAN member states – unlike the European Union – are not about to surrender national sovereignty to a supra-national organization, there is a limitation to how much one can expect individual countries to accommodate to the preferences of others (assuming a majority voice concerning a particular course of action). In this respect, the presence of a veto card means that any one country can essentially block a motion if it perceives that such an action runs contrary to its national interests. While countries are frequently exhorted to obey the rule of law, closer scrutiny of how this is applied in practice can show how it is problematic. Scholars have observed that “if the rule of law is the prerogative of the regional grouping, what does that imply for states’ sovereignties?” Whether Cambodia – by choosing to ally itself with China – has done the right thing or not will be seen in time to come, but in this instance, Cambodia is merely acting in accordance to its own national interests.

As Singapore’s ambassador-at-large Bilahari Kausikan recently notes, “Cambodia was acting within the letter of its rights under the ASEAN Charter which makes clear that decisions will be made by consensus.” Hence, to criticize Cambodia, as wielding its veto card for purely selfish purpose without respecting the long-term interest of the grouping is to expect Cambodia to act contrary to its own interests so as to preserve a modicum of ASEAN respectability concerning the latter’s unity. This is unlikely to happen.

At the same time, it must be pointed out that notwithstanding the challenges to ASEAN unity and centrality in recent years as a result of big-power competition, the ASEAN structure has been robust and flexible enough to accommodate varying degrees of disagreements, even among its own members – for instance, over Myanmar participation during its junta-led regime. Given ASEAN’s diverse membership with different conceptions of what their national interests might be, the consensus-mode of decision making represents the only viable option at present. While some scholars have argued for an ASEAN-minus approach to resolve matters of geopolitical differences with external powers, such a move would officially create factions within ASEAN and more worryingly, erode ASEAN’s voice in the international arena.

In this respect, ASEAN’s diversity and informal diplomacy remains its greatest strength, and should not be jettisoned for more “clear-cut” solutions. While it is true that ASEAN should not be held hostage by one or two countries, one should also be careful what we wish for, particularly if that means surrendering national interests to achieve some kind of “regional harmony” that does not sufficiently take into account state interest. Thus far, a balance of power strategy – however ambiguously defined that might be – has proved useful for the ASEAN member states in their pursuit of national interests and is likely to persist. If one sees ASEAN as an arena for major-power competition, then the only way to ensure that member states are given the freedom to act without external coercion from the major powers is to ensure that a delicate balance among major-power influence is reached.

Moving forward

Regional dynamics are sufficiently frayed as a result of recent events and the South China Sea cannot be permanently ignored by member states. At the same time, an ASEAN approach to external powers must include both economic and geopolitical imperatives. In this respect, ASEAN’s ability to protect and preserve its interests will depend on how well it can manage its relations with major powers, particularly China and the United States. This is where the ball is in China’s court – more so than the U.S. – to act and present itself as a great power that is worthy of emulation and respect. Only if Beijing is able to persuade that China’s national interests *do not* run contrary to those of ASEAN can an enduring and amicable relationship be forged.

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