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ASEAN as Pivotal Actor: Balancing Centrality & the Indo-Pacific

By Joel Ng

SYNOPSIS

“ASEAN Centrality” has previously been defined as ASEAN being the “least objectionable” actor to lead. However, in a wider Indo-Pacific of resident competing powers, ASEAN may well be rethought of as the pivotal actor to enable their goals to be accomplished.

COMMENTARY

WHILE THE COVID-19 pandemic brought many countries together in common cause, for the world’s two superpowers, China and the United States, tensions have continued along their pre-pandemic trajectory – with gradual but noticeable escalations between them.

ASEAN once again finds itself in rather familiar territory of being pulled in different directions as more assertive major powers lean on the regional grouping to be more supportive of their overtures or recognise their claims. While China’s pressure on the South China Sea issue has been longer running, the “Quad” powers of Australia, India, Japan and the US have more recently been trying to get their definitions of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) recognised by ASEAN states. ASEAN’s response has been familiar, even predictable.

ASEAN Centrality Under Pressure

The 10-member group called for open and inclusive multilateralism, and for rivals to resist unhealthy competition or confrontation. Yet as major external powers do as they will, ASEAN is perennially wracked by the question of its putative centrality. Why should the small and medium states of the region dictate terms to the larger ones?

Historically, the traditional conception of ASEAN centrality emerged from the idea that ASEAN was the “least objectionable” actor in the Asia-Pacific, which made it a default interlocutor for security affairs of the wider region. Bigger powers did not trust each other sufficiently to accept the others’ overtures, so it fell upon ASEAN to adapt such initiatives to an acceptable format for all.

At the end of the Cold War, hopes were high that despite ideological differences, the major powers would converge on common interests and cooperative outcomes. Today, however, China and the US are drifting apart, and only the most optimistic can hope that they will come back to facing the same direction without some major changes in policy.

The question for ASEAN is whether “least objectionable” is still a sufficient factor to maintain its centrality, and moreover, whether that logic still works when external powers are moving further apart rather than becoming more cooperative.

A recent major change, originally conceptualised by Japan but gradually being accepted by others, was to redefine the “Asia-Pacific” as a broader “Indo-Pacific” that brought Australia, India, and the US more clearly into the region as resident powers. In this wider Indo-Pacific, ASEAN members fear that their presence will be diluted as major powers redefine themselves as natives rather than outsiders, as had traditionally been understood of “East Asia”.

Indigeneity brings with it claims of legitimate domestic stakes in the region, which explained its reticence with the term. The region has now accepted the nomenclature through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and must deal with Quad countries being more assertive in regional affairs.

ASEAN as Pivotal Actor in Indo-Pacific

However, every change brings new opportunities. In geographical terms, ASEAN sits at the pivot between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and this feature is not lost on those who ascribe to its centrality. But there is even more to this than meets the eye.

In political science, the “pivotal actor” is defined as the actor who tips a legislature past the threshold needed to pass legislation. One must bear in mind that the rules of the domain – such as what majority is needed, or how votes are cast – affect the definition of the “pivotal actor”.

Given the pivotal actor’s support, the preferences of the rest of a divided legislature are irrelevant as success is assured. In the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN’s strategic position between the major powers as well as its geographic centrality offers it the pivotal role for the Indo-Pacific – if it can recognise its own strength, as well as the potential pitfalls.

ASEAN states now find themselves as actors whose support is required for external powers to secure a threshold of support to achieve their goals. China cannot claim its “Belt and Road Initiative” stands to benefit the region without the region acknowledging and approving the projects.

Quad countries cannot assert that their insistence on the FOIP is in the region's interests without echoing ASEAN's position on the necessary norms and rules as outlined in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific; all Quad members give ASEAN a front-and-centre role to play in their strategic visions.

A “Quad Plus” without ASEAN?

While analysts have looked back to the first Quadrilateral Security Dialogue that flopped as a litmus test of whether the Quad 2.0 will succeed, it may be worth bearing in mind an even earlier externally-driven project that failed to consult ASEAN.

In 2008, Australia's then-prime minister Kevin Rudd proposed to establish an “Asia-Pacific Community”, perhaps with one eye on ASEAN's newly established community pillars, to expand the cooperation in APEC. The regional reaction was icy, receiving an unusually frank dismissal as “dead in the water” by a senior Singaporean official – simply on the grounds that insufficient discussion had taken place with regional members.

In March this year, the Quad held a virtual meeting to discuss the pandemic response, inviting only Vietnam from amongst the ASEAN members, as well as two traditional ASEAN Plus Six members – New Zealand and South Korea, to participate. The Quad's moves to try to selectively invite some ASEAN members or find a “coalition of the willing” through a “Quad Plus” shows they are mindful of the pivotal power of ASEAN.

But a fragmented ASEAN loses that pivotal power, where tipping points may be reached with just enough members peeled away, and where the remaining members do not have the heft to influence major powers in any direction. The benefits only come from staying united, without which ASEAN Centrality will also wither away.

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