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Asian Multilateralism in Uncertain Times

ASEAN's Regional Architecture: Navigating the Complexities

By Le Dinh Tinh

SYNOPSIS

ASEAN roles and rules of engagement in the construction of regional security architecture have been a subject of debate for years. Some argue that ASEAN has been overestimated while others point to the existence and growth of the grouping as underscoring its continued relevancy.

COMMENTARY

PEACE IN the Asia-Pacific is as fragile and hard-fought as elsewhere in the world. What makes it different is the emergence of the "contest of the century" between the United States and China in this regional theatre. The economic gravity of the region today gives its more than 50% of the world's GDP and more leverage in institution-building in security and defence. There is, however, the lack of an overarching security arrangement that can work for all.

Against this backdrop, ASEAN as one of the most important stakeholders in the region, offers its own version of a regional security architecture based on the ASEAN way. The working principles proposed by ASEAN have received both support and criticism from policymakers and scholars. Yet if both sides were put on a scale, the weight should tilt toward the supportive side. Similarly, notwithstanding its challenges and shortcomings, ASEAN still is the most viable platform for building the security architecture of the Asia-Pacific region.

Facing the Uneasy Fact

Regional talks on security and defence cooperation have been extensive but actions on the ground are another issue. ASEAN-led mechanisms such as AHA Centre (for coordinating humanitarian relief) and ARDEX (exercises for response to disasters) are encouraging efforts but more coordinated action for the wider Asia-Pacific region is needed; for example, in the area of HADR, not to mention in hard security topics such as joint defence policy planning.

The reason is quite simple: lack of substantive cooperation between major players in the region, notably between China and the United States. That is why the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has tried on confidence building measures (CBMs) for the whole Asia-Pacific region but the result has not lived up to expectations.

Before tackling the question of trust, let's see the realities of current proposals. There are plenty of them but in a nutshell they are either US-led, China-led, or ASEAN-led. In an ideal scenario, these arrangements should be able to have interoperability with one another. But the fact is the inter-mechanism communication is not as robust as it should be.

For example, though both the US and China say publicly that they support ASEAN centrality in the region, they might not necessarily consider ASEAN as a part of their own initiatives. This also holds true where the US and China offer ASEAN to join their initiatives while the latter does not see a clear role for itself.

Consider the Quad Plus and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These grand initiatives might contribute to the betterment of public goods in the region but they are not without risks. Furthermore, there has not been a strong and vital connection between these schemes and ASEAN.

The ASEAN Option

On the positive side, ASEAN-led security arrangements are the most feasible options among all others as the role of ASEAN as an honest broker, mediator, and convener has been widely recognised. There is no other viable alternative. For instance, any offer by the US might generate some reservation on the part of China and vice versa.

More than just being a convenor, ASEAN has shown that it has strategic assets to step up regional cooperation, including in the fields of security and defence. The first type of asset is the strategic anchors that it has and used successfully to allow partners to link up with, notably the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. The second type of asset is the institutional arrangements such as ARF, ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus that ropes in ASEAN's security dialogue partners.

During the chairmanship of Vietnam in 2020, the language used by ASEAN on the South China Sea issue within these mechanisms, for example, was less ambiguous in terms of legality, i.e. clearer references were made to the 1982 UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). On top of these arrangements is the East Asia Summit which is a platform for leaders' strategic engagement and exchange.

The availability of these assets coupled with the recognised roles of ASEAN as an

honest broker, convenor and facilitator make the group the most promising candidate for taking the lead in the construction of a desirable regional security architecture.

ASEAN Under Further Scrutiny

The critique of ASEAN and its ability to initiate closer and more effective security and defence cooperation as building blocks for a regional security architecture mostly focuses on the way ASEAN works.

The consensus-based and incremental approach, however, does not work well all the time, especially during crises. ASEAN also has the problem of solidarity, not only because of the divide-and-rule tactic employed by outsiders but also because ASEAN member-states do not see the world the same way from inside out. For example, ASEAN came short of issuing a foreign ministerial (AMM) joint statement in 2012 and ADMM-Plus joint declaration in 2015 due to disagreement on the text concerning the South China Sea.

While ASEAN remains a relevant regional body, its centrality cannot be taken for granted. It must be earned by ASEAN working harder as often argued by the then Indonesian foreign minister Marty Natalegawa. If ASEAN could not take a few bolder steps forward to enhance its visibility and relevancy, its central role in building a regional security architecture would be in question. In the words of Natalegawa, ASEAN should exercise more transformative power.

Looking Ahead

Overall, however, while ASEAN might be criticised for being slow, it does get things done. The existence of the association in the past five decades is, in fact, a remarkable demonstration of its capacity to mobilise partners in peace. This is one aspect no one can deny.

If there is one lesson that can be learned, it is that the multilateral institutions engaged with ASEAN should discuss the issues at hand in a more candid and constructive manner. The 2012 and 2015 incidents should be avoided. Furthermore, in addition to non-traditional security issues, these platforms should also study the possibility of cooperation in addressing traditional security challenges and state-on-state security concerns such as territorial disputes and military conflicts.

The vision of ASEAN for the post-2025 period should demonstrate that ASEAN is not only the convenor of critical meetings but also a formidable player ready to face challenges head on.

Also, to realise the full effect of these platforms, ASEAN partners should show stronger support for ASEAN centrality in a more consistent and substantive manner. ASEAN can exercise impartiality better with more resources. In terms of size, ASEAN is the fifth largest economy in the world but it mostly comprises developing countries. Capacity is key for performance.

It should start with projects for practical cooperation which can then be expanded to include longer term proposals. ‘Partners’ does not mean major powers only. In fact,

middle powers like Japan, Korea, and Australia can be partners of great significance. In the last few years, middle powers, when they come together, have been successful in creating non-major power initiatives that work effectively.

One example is ASEAN itself. More recent ones include the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the Alliance for Multilateralism, to name just a few. The nexus between ASEAN and global governance institutions such as the United Nations can and should also be strengthened.

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