



View Point

Great Power Politics and Regional Architecture in the Asia-Pacific

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As Asia-Pacific inches towards the gravity of global politics, the regional strategic discourses are being dominated by the spectre of great power politics riding on the rise of two major powers - China and India. These players are experiencing robust growth in their internal and international capacities, as evident from continued economic growth, military modernisation, and the development of more nuanced approaches to their foreign relations. As a result, they are able to exert power and influence in a much wider geographical canvas and in a much more definitive manner than they could twenty years ago. Moreover, they are able to influence developments in each other's geographical vicinity, a potentially worrisome situation of mutual vulnerability given long-standing animosity and mistrust between the two powers. For example, while India may be worried about China's growing activities in South Asia and Indian Ocean, China may be concerned about India's enhanced strategic engagement in Southeast and Northeast Asia.

In contrast to its welcome posture towards the rising India, the region of Asia-Pacific has exhibited a sense of insecurity and uncertainty about the rise of China, primarily among the neighbours along the latter's southern and eastern rim. Much of this insecurity arises out of an opaque nature of the rise of China, its long-standing territorial or boundary disputes with its neighbours and a somewhat an aggressive nature of China's approach to the contentious issues, such as the South China Sea dispute.

ASEAN's response to the challenge of great power politics has come primarily in the form of (a) institutionalising great power relations by bringing them together in a dialogic framework, (b) regulating the agenda of cooperation and raising the stakes in regional cooperation, and (c) engaging multiple powers that could constrain the behaviour of a single great power. The emergence of East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005 and ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meeting (ADMM) Plus in October 2010 are steps in that direction. The ASEAN states are trying to get China to 'commit to the ASEAN-driven cooperative processes' with the two-fold objectives of making China more responsive to the regional concerns as well as taming the enormous power of China by making it more responsible on how the later uses its power.

If the developments during the last five years are any indicator, ASEAN seems to be losing its tactical grip over the regional strategic discourses. The evolving structure of great power politics has drawn the attention away from multilateral strategic dialogue and regional cooperation towards great power rivalries and evolving unstable regional geopolitics. In fact, the regional and global attention has focused on what the rise of these powers mean for the world, whether China's rise can be a stabilising or destabilising process, whether India can balance China in the future or whether US is joining hands with India and other Asian powers to counter-balance China. It is rarely being asked whether and how ASEAN will continue facilitating regional cooperation and neutralise the negative implications of the evolving great power politics in the region. In fact, the ascent of great power politics has posed one of the most formidable challenges to the ASEAN-driven cooperative processes in three specific ways.

First, the ASEAN-driven cooperative processes are gradually emerging as a theatre of great power rivalry. As a regional cooperative interlocutor, ASEAN has embarked on creating cooperative space to facilitate dialogue among regional players. It finds its agencies – ASEAN+1 initiatives, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), EAS, and now ADMM+ – emerging as avenues for great power projection. Apparently, there appear to be fissures within ASEAN on variety of issues, including the ASEAN Charter, principle of non-intervention, greater economic integration, responses to the rise of major powers in Asia that are becoming evident and may weaken the ASEAN cooperative efforts. China had also proposed to hold the EAS in Beijing in 2006, an idea summarily rejected by ASEAN. While China offered to work with its long-

standing rival, Vietnam, at the ADMM+, the US offered to facilitate cooperation on maritime security. India identified terrorism and sea-piracy as key security concern and called for developing cooperative approach to address these issues.

Second, the ASEAN-driven regional architecture is coming under enormous pressure from the hostile nature of relations among the major powers, nearly hijacking the agenda of these regional initiatives and giving them a somewhat partisan outlook. In the face of growing opposition to China's dominant role and the latter's perception of growing anti-China lobby within the EAS, Beijing has begun to focus its energy and resources on ASEAN+3 cooperative framework. As a result, ASEAN+3 and EAS are emerging as parallel processes of cooperation, causing diversion of resources, inhibiting greater scope for regional cooperation and leading to further polarisation even in meeting common regional challenges. Such a competitive scenario brings out the possibility of these forums losing comprehensive regional support and emerging as partisan initiatives. While China may stop contributing to the growth of the EAS and focus its energy on developing ASEAN+3 initiative, Japan may have become more involved in the ASEAN+6 initiative (now ASEAN+8 with the entry of USA and Russia). The Chinese role in the Korean peninsula has proved to be a mixed bag of opportunities and challenges. Though China has projected its role as a facilitator of Six-Party Talk, it has often used the forum to enhance its own diplomatic profile and undermine the US influence in the region. The Korean peninsula continues to remain one of the most important sources of tension in Northeast Asia.

Finally, can ASEAN continue to work as a regional conflict management agency in the face of growing domination by great powers? The events in South China Sea in 2010 suggest that it has not been able to perform this role in the region. The notion of peaceful resolution of the South China Sea dispute, as once formulated and mutually agreed by both China and ASEAN during the late 1990s, seems to have been undermined with the Chinese designation of the South China Sea as an area of 'Core National Interest,' an epithet kept reserved only for what China considered more sensitive conflict zones such as Taiwan or Tibet. This stance indicates China's growing aggression towards ASEAN and the US diplomatic intervention points towards ASEAN's depleting strategic capital in, what has come to characterised as 'Socialising China.'

It is yet to be seen whether the US involvement in the ASEAN process is going to strengthen ASEAN process or further enhance the latter's dependency on great powers for regional security. The near-absence of ASEAN from the global focus on the regional strategic debate hints at the possibility of gradual de-emphasis on the leadership of ASEAN in setting the agenda of cooperation in the region. Such a process can further diminish the dialogic and collaborative significance of these institutions, and paving the way for greater adherence to unstable great power rivalries than cooperative politics. For example, the US presence in the South China Sea seems to have received much more attention than the country's membership of East Asia Summit, even though they somewhat reflect similar strategic objective – reducing China's growing influence in the region.

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