



ASEAN in 2013: Coming out of the Clouds

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Introduction

Bandar Seri Bagawan, the capital city of Brunei Darussalam, witnessed from 27 June – 2 July 2013 complex diplomatic manoeuvrings– strong statements, joint declarations, joint communiqués, collective photo-shoots, pleasant handshakes, exchange of words (both pleasant and unpleasant ones), and speeches of leaders expressing intents and virtues for cooperation and integration amidst uncertainty and acrimony. The leaders of ASEAN countries and its dialogue partner countries were participating in the 46th ASEAN Ministerial Meetings and several related meetings, such as the 3rd East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, 20th ASEAN Regional Forum meeting, 14th ASEAN Plus Three Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, and the ASEAN Summit Meeting.

ASEAN at the Brunei Summit of July 2013

The key outcomes were (a) Joint Communique of the 46th ASEAN Ministerial Meetings, and (b) Chairman’s Statements of 3rd East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, 20th ASEAN Regional Forum Meeting, 14th ASEAN Plus Three Foreign Ministers’ Meetings and the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference (PMC) 10+1 Sessions with the Dialogue Partners.¹ The meeting also unveiled a Plan of Action to Strengthen the Implementation of the Treaty of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (2013-2017). These declarations and statements also brought forth important trends characterising the ASEAN-driven regional cooperative process.

Renewed Commitment towards constructing ‘a Lasting ASEAN Community’

The ASEAN member-states underscored the importance of time-bound realisation of a ‘politically cohesive, economically integrated and socially responsible ASEAN Community by 2015,’ if ASEAN wishes to retain its centrality in the evolving regional geopolitics.² In this regard, they called for the implementation of the Bali Concord III Plan of Action (2013-2017) and ‘welcomed the support of Dialogue Partners, external parties, regional and international organisations.’³ Given the growing presence of the nuclear powers and their growing interest in the region, the ASEAN countries have shown their continued commitment to the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Treaty.

Sustained Effort for developing Rules of Engagement in the South China Sea

These meetings also saw a sustained effort on the part of ASEAN leaders and its dialogue partners to convince all the claimant parties to devise together a legally binding arrangement or Code of Conduct over South China Sea. The 3rd meeting of the EAS Foreign Ministers deliberated over two such proposals – Russian proposal for developing ‘a framework of principles on strengthening security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region’ and Indonesian suggestion for an Indo-Pacific framework ‘based on the principles contained in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and in line with the 2011 Declaration of the East Asia Summit on the Principles for Mutually Beneficial Relations (Bali Principles)’.⁴ The member states decided to organise various dialogues and workshops on the Russian proposal while also taking into consideration existing frameworks for security cooperation within the region.⁵ The US, as a resident Asia-Pacific power, remained unequivocal in reiterating its ‘national interest in the maintenance of peace and stability, respect for international law, unimpeded lawful commerce and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea’.⁶ The US Secretary of State during his visit to Brunei called for speedy formulation of the Code of Conduct on the disputed South China Sea.

A show of ASEAN unity and Centrality

The 19-page Joint Communique of the 46th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting also tried to underscore a common sense within the grouping that the member-states were over the Phnom Penh setback and had moved on. The Joint Communique not only mentioned what ASEAN member-states had discussed but also reflected on how the dynamic of ASEAN’s relations with its dialogue partners were evolving.

All the three major documents – Joint Communiqué of the 46th AMM, Chairman’s Statement of the 3rd EAS Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, and Chairman’s Statement of the 20th ASEAN Regional Forum – asserted the centrality of ASEAN in the regional cooperative deliberations and also in any overarching security architecture for the region. The member states not only highlighted the critical role of EAS in the realisation of the ASEAN Community but also identified as the main vehicle for broader and deeper regional integration.

Two Decades of ASEAN Regional Forum

While celebrating the two decades of ASEAN Regional Forum, the member-countries underscored not only the centrality of ASEAN in the ARF deliberations but also critical contribution of the ARF in shaping the regional security architecture. ARF, during the last two decades, has emerged as ‘a primary forum for dialogue and cooperation on political and security issues in the Asia-Pacific region’.⁷ A general consensus seems to be emerging among the member-states about elevating the ARF operations from the level of confidence-building to that of preventive diplomacy, as outlined in the vision statement at the time of the inception of the forum. Nevertheless, the forum still needs to develop an agreeable modus operandi for it to function as a preventive diplomacy mechanism. The Preventive Diplomacy Work Plan also offers a roadmap for the transition ‘from stage I to stage II on the basis of consensus, through action-oriented cooperation and activities, while continuing confidence-building measures.’⁸ In this regard, a proposal has been mooted providing for preventive diplomacy training for the forum.

Fresh Impetus to Phnom Penh Declaration

18 member countries of the East Asia Summit decided, on the suggestion of China, to develop a Plan of Action to implement the Phnom Penh Declaration of EAS Development Initiative. The Phnom Penh Declaration was adopted during the 7th East Asia Summit meeting in Cambodia in 2012. It seeks to enhance regional connectivity, engage in sustainable development, ensure ASEAN centrality and its leadership role in facilitating regional efforts towards achieving millennium developmental goals. The Declaration identified ‘ASEAN as the driving force in the EAS and its centrality in other related regional mechanisms’ in various collective efforts towards narrowing the ‘development gaps in the region and establish the ASEAN Community by 2015’.⁹ It also called upon the EAS member-states ‘to promote common development through mutual support and cooperation’.¹⁰

ASEAN's Trepidations

Regional cooperation under the aegis of ASEAN has been a function of power. The grouping has performed well when supported by important global and regional players. However, the grouping has exhibited elements of vulnerability, disunity, and reverse enmeshment when faced with the challenge of managing great power rivalries. The US remained the principal pillar of support for the most of the Cold War era. The regional grouping suffered when it perceived the US strategic withdrawal during the Post-Cold War era. ASEAN performed the best during the first decade of 21st century when it received the support of all the major players. The grouping has, once again, begun to experience disunity and torn in multiple directions during the second decade of 21st century as it is gradually emerging as a theatre of multi-layered major power rivalries since May 2010.

The emerging dynamic of great power politics exhibits a new problem confronting ASEAN – centrifugal pressure where the weak core of ASEAN is finding it difficult to manage the powerful peripheries. The great powers on its periphery are putting enormous pressure on the unity of the ASEAN structures and its coordinated functioning rendering it difficult for the grouping to focus on its core process of regional integration both intra-ASEAN as well as supra-ASEAN. What is more worrisome is growing perception among smaller ASEAN members that they are being forced to choose sides from among these major powers especially between the US and China.¹¹ The discordant diplomatic exchanges a year ago at Phnom Penh can be seen as a product of great power pressure on the grouping.

At the same time, the grouping is also grappling with the challenge of multifocality of the regional geopolitics. Today ASEAN has to deal not only with Southeast Asia alone, rather also with the larger and somewhat varied geopolitical canvas of East Asia, Asia-Pacific, or the Indo-Pacific. Though the multiplicity of geopolitical lenses is somewhat enriching the diplomatic practices of ASEAN, it is diverting the attention of the grouping from its focus on pan-ASEAN integration. In other words, multifocality for a weak ASEAN seems to have been a draining experience as well. ASEAN with a weak core does not have a strong voice in dictating the shape of regional geopolitics which are somewhat creeping into ASEAN worldview from the outside.

Time for a ‘Pivot to ASEAN’ Policy

All the above-mentioned trends call for sincere attempts towards strengthening the ASEAN core and promoting its unity and centrality. It is time that major powers and stakeholders of the Asia-Pacific region divert their attention away from the hostile discourses of “Core National Interest” and “Pivot to Asia.” They should rather concentrate their energy on what one could call as “Pivot to ASEAN” strategy or the policy of centripetality. Major power support to ASEAN can come in four distinct ways – effective agenda-setting and result-oriented deliberations within ASEAN-led forums, concrete steps towards developing rules of peaceful and cooperative behaviour in the region, such as Code of Conduct over South China Sea, speedy realisation of ASEAN Community, and desisting from treating ASEAN-led forums as a theatre of great power rivalries.

The broad contours have already begun to emerge. The 20th ARF meeting and 3rd EAS Foreign Ministers’ Meeting seemed to provide a breath of peace and cordiality after almost three years of war-rhetoric, instability and intense hostility in the Asia Pacific region. The participating leaders of the two Great Powers – the US and China – were sending signals towards more meaningful dialogue under the leadership of ASEAN-led cooperative processes.

Moreover, ASEAN needs to fix itself before it can think of leading the regional security architecture in any meaningful manner. The events of 2012 at Phnom Penh had clearly highlighted the disunity within ASEAN to the extent of seriously challenging the ASEAN process itself. The Phnom Penh experience also underscored that the process of ASEAN integration and its realisation of three pillars of ASEAN Community – ASEAN Political and Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community, and ASEAN Cultural Community – remain far from a complete process. The Brunei Summit of 2013 seems to have brought the ASEAN wheel back on track with their collective emphasis on fixing themselves and time-bound realisation of ASEAN Community.

India’s Role in the ‘Pivot to ASEAN’ Policy

The debate in India on the Look East policy has continued for the last twenty years among the optimists and sceptics alike regarding what the policy has been able to and what it has failed to achieve. For some the policy has been extremely successful and for others it could have achieved much more than what it has done so far. However, the experts and policy-makers have hardly debated how and to what extent has New Delhi contributed to the effective functioning of the

ASEAN-led cooperative processes, such as ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit, or ASEAN Plus Defence Ministerial Meeting (ADMM Plus). The principal reason for the one-sided debate lies in the approach towards Look East policy as a foreign policy initiative of India as a South Asian player rather than an expression of rising power behaviour. As India's power grows, the level of expectation from the region is set to rise as well. India as a rising power must meet the expectations of the ASEAN region. India's contribution can come in three critical areas of the ASEAN functioning.

First, India should actively participate in the ASEAN processes and contribute to the regional agenda-setting and deliberations. India's participation in these processes has remained limited that has raised an important question about whether India is being a fence-sitter in the region. New Delhi should also engage the ASEAN region intellectually in developing ways and means to strengthen the ASEAN process. This process has begun but remained a non-starter. There is no dedicated forum apart from Delhi Dialogue that undertakes such an exercise on a regular basis. In this regard, the setting up of ASEAN-India Centre in New Delhi can be a welcome start.

Second, India should address, on an urgent basis, the growing gap between the policy pronouncements and their implementation. Many of India's projects, such as connectivity, investment or development projects, have remained incomplete. As a result, a general perception has developed in the ASEAN region that New Delhi has played late and slow in projecting the Look East policy, especially when compared with the diplomatic overtures of other major powers in the region. This policy has both pros as well as cons. On the one hand, it allows India to watch others' policies and preferences before exhibiting its own behaviour, it adversely affects, on the other hand, the timely implementation of India's policy pronouncements and sends the signal of inefficient and procrastinating decision-making process. The practical advantage of this policy has been in the form of India's mature response to aggressive and assertive strategic behaviour of both China and the US in the Asia-Pacific. The practical disadvantage has come in the form of various projects lying incomplete, such as the revival of Nalanda University Project.

Finally, India should start contributing in significant manner to the developmental initiatives of the region. Efforts, such as Entrepreneurship Development Initiative, Centres for English Language Training and several others remain modest and miniscule. The level of Indian

contribution should go up manifold. Such an approach would also allow New Delhi to project the rising India in a better light.

Conclusion

As ASEAN in 2013 begin to walk, once again, on safer trajectory, India should lend its diplomatic capital to further consolidate the ASEAN processes that would, in turn, strengthen India's strategic positioning in the wider Indo-Pacific region. There is a need for new vision, new activism regarding how to broadbase the policy-goals, transform a government-led policy into a people-driven and natural process of engagement. There is a need to go beyond the beaten track of diplomacy and introduce innovation in what and how India seeks to achieve its objectives in the fast-changing Indo-Pacific world.

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Endnotes

¹For details, see "The 46th AMM and Related Meetings, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam, 27 June – 2 July 2013," *ASEAN Secretariat*, <http://www.asean.org/communities/asean-political-security-community/category/the-46th-amm-and-related-meetings> accessed July 20, 2013

²"The 46th AMM and Related Meetings, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam, 27 June – 2 July 2013," *ASEAN Secretariat*, <http://www.asean.org/communities/asean-political-security-community/category/the-46th-amm-and-related-meetings> accessed July 20, 2013

³"The 46th AMM and Related Meetings, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam, 27 June – 2 July 2013," *ASEAN Secretariat*, <http://www.asean.org/communities/asean-political-security-community/category/the-46th-amm-and-related-meetings> accessed July 20, 2013

⁴Chairman's Statement of the 3rd East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting, 2 July 2013, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam, *ASEAN Secretariat*, <http://www.asean.org/images/Statement/chairmans%20statement%20of%20the%203rd%20eas%20fmm%20-%20final%20final.pdf> accessed July 20, 2013

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⁶"Kerry urges progress on South China Sea tensions," *Global Post*, July 1, 2013, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/afp/130701/kerry-urges-progress-south-china-sea-tensions> accessed July 22, 2013

⁷"Chairman's Statement of the 20th ASEAN Regional Forum," 2 July 2013, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam, *ASEAN Secretariat*, <http://www.asean.org/images/Statement/chairmans%20statement%20of%20the%2020th%20asean%20regional%20forum%20-%20final.pdf> accessed July 22, 2013.

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⁹ “Phnom Penh Declaration on the East Asia Summit Development Initiative,”

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¹⁰ “Phnom Penh Declaration on the East Asia Summit Development Initiative,”

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¹¹Satu Limaye, “Beyond choosing between China and the US,” *East Asia Forum*, July 23, 2013,

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/07/23/beyond-choosing-between-china-and-the-us/> accessed July 24, 2013