

ASEAN'S SECURITY CHALLENGES AMIDST BIG POWERS RIVALRY

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Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am delighted to be invited to the 6th International Turkish-Asian Congress.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Süleyman ŞENSOY, Chairman of TASAM for his kind invitation and the warm hospitality.

At the outset, I would like to congratulate the Turkish Asian Center for Strategic Studies for organizing this interesting forum as platform to openly debate factors that cause cooperation to fail and at the same time discuss tangible benefits that cooperation can bring to all Asian countries.

I shall look forward to actively engage with other prominent experts and all of you who are invited to take part in this important congress.

I am here to present my view on the Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN)'s security cooperation to promote peace and stability and amidst big power rivalry which has emerged in the East Asia region.

I intend to discuss ASEAN relationship with the two most powerful states – the US and China – and highlight its unique ability to sway in the midst of tension created by these two major powers which have dictated and influences state behavior in the region. At the end, I make some suggestions as to how ASEAN's strategic position can addresses effectively the security challenges facing the region?

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In recent time, we have witnessed tension in East Asia arising from the differences between the US and China over a range of security issues. By holding strongly to their stances, the two big powers create contentious security tension, particularly in the South China Sea.

The US perceives a rising China as posing a challenge to US primacy in East Asia, therefore roll out the "back to Asia" policy. This move prompts the Chinese to feel that its rise is being contained and worry that their core interest could be diluted in the long run.

The potential confrontation lies upon the structural conflict of interest between these two most powerful states driven by their mutual mistrust and ideological, strategic and political differences that cannot be channel through a monolithic security process.

Under such circumstance, it is extremely important that ASEAN succeeds in finding the right balance so as to reap the strong economic relations with an ascendant China and at the same time mend defense ties with the United States to keep the region at peace and stable.

First, allow me to share some thoughts on ASEAN and the factors concerning the rise of China

China achieved a remarkable milestone in 2010 by surpassing Japan and has emerged as the second largest economy in the world. The Chinese government has embarked on various reforms and its relatively high growth rate of the past two decade have stunned the world with its labor force, creativity and purchasing power, its commitment to development and its degree of national cohesion.

More recently, China has become extra confidence and increasingly assertive in world affairs. With its economic affluence, China is now spending more on defense. This year, the Chinese defense budget hits 670 billion Yuan or equivalent to US Dollars 110 billion, an increase by 12.7 per cent over actual spending last year – a figure that is arguably to be much more according to foreign defense analysts.

With this substantial defense budget, China has begun to modernize the People's Liberation Army (PLA). With 2.3 million soldiers, the PLA is the world's largest standing military and its modernization has been accompanied by gradual steps toward greater engagement with the outside world. China's military now possesses most of the sophisticated weapon systems found in the arsenals of developed Western nations, including nuclear weapons. The Chinese military's goal is to produce a fully modern force before mid-21st century.

China is set to transform the balance of power in Southeast Asia. The concerns here is how China will use its growing influence to reshape the rules and institutions of the regional system to better serve its interests and other states in the system. Some Southeast Asian states have interpreted China's rise as a security threat, seeing that a new regional order dictated by China would bring about tension, distrust, and conflict.

In such a scenario, how will ASEAN cope with China? Is it a threat of an opportunity?

China's rise seen as a threat

During the Cold War, the non-communist states in Southeast Asia were suspicious of China because it supported communist insurgency in the region. Today, some Southeast Asian countries still regarded China as a threat.

Four of ASEAN states, namely Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines and Vietnam, have disputes over the chain of islands in the South China Sea. Although territory is no doubt at the core, but the six claimants

compete to secure the reported huge oil and gas deposits in the sea bed to the Paracel and Spratly Islands.

As imported energy is vital to China's economic engine, safeguarding its energy sources near and far is at the Chinese's "core interest" which must be protected and secured by any means, including military.

The sharpened hostility in May 2010 over territorial claims in the South China Sea has set in motion a confrontational mood between China and Vietnam and the Philippines and to some extent with the US. More recently, the April-May 2012 military standoff between China and the Philippines in the Scarborough Shoal has sent yet another worrying signal that this latest tension has the potential to spoil the relationship between ASEAN and China and damage ASEAN's further reintegration.

China's action pushes the two Southeast Asian countries closer to the US. The tension in the South China Sea has caused increasing concern in Washington. The US is ready to provide hardware to modernize the military of its close ally. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the US would honor its 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty which commits the US to defend the Philippines from external aggression, including any attack on Philippine public vessels (naval or air) in the Pacific. As for Vietnam, the military cooperation with the US has increased, despite the fact that there is no military alliance.

There are real concerns that things might get out of hand which can plunge this region into military conflicts. If individual state pursues its own path toward using brinkmanship style or relying on bilateral defense treaty to counter China, backlash will inevitably prevail.

[China's rise seen as an opportunity](#)

In a process to build its sphere of influence, China capitalizes its rise as a positive opportunity to enforce the process of regionalism toward a peaceful regional order. China has been standing behind strongly ASEAN's effort in such a process.

The reason behind this move is simple. Southeast Asian countries are considered lucrative markets for Chinese products, source of raw materials, investment destinations and tourist attractions. Southeast Asia serves as a passageway and lifeline for China in accessing its sources of energy in the Middle East. Strategically, the South China Sea remains a major part of China's maritime interest. Even though China currently has territorial disputes with some Southeast Asian states, they have all accepted the necessity to resolve the conflict through a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, signed at the end of China-ASEAN Summit in 2002 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia with a goal of maintaining peace and stability in the region.

China has been a strong supporter of ASEAN's regionalism process. The creation of ASEAN Plus Three (APT) in 1997, formally brought China, Japan and South Korea into the region. The East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005 was an important forum to achieve the East Asian Community concept. It consists of the ten ASEAN countries, the three APT nations, with India, Australia and New Zealand. The United States and Russia were admitted to the EAS in 2010 and had for the first time attend the official meeting in of the Sixth EAS meeting in Bali, held on 21 October 2011.

In parallel, China has endeavored to strengthen ties with individual members of ASEAN on bilateral basis. China's foreign aid has had a growing and tangible impact in many Southeast Asian countries. Its aid comprises a wide range of economic assistance that includes non-development assistance and low interest loans, as well as trade and investment agreement. Often, Chinese assistance does not include conditions that western donors frequently place on aid, such as democratic reform, market openness, and environmental protection. This Chinese policy of non-interference in domestic affairs often wins friends among Southeast Asian governments as a sign of China's respectful attitude of their countries' sovereignty.

With consistent application of its soft power, China is able to downplay earlier perception of seeing China's rise as a threat in Southeast Asia. China will continue to earn greater respect if it can assure that its soft power is put to good use and its economic miracle is beneficial to other countries in the region. In this sense China's rise is not a zero sum, on the contrary, is beneficial to region. We will see a region of peace and prosperity, if ASEAN and China are successful in consolidating their partnership in all aspects of their relations.

Second, let consider ASEAN-US Engagement as a factor of China's rise

The United States once emerged from the Cold War as a role model for its democratic ideology and the best form of government, is now declining its presence at world stage. Although no one could deny that the US has remained the only superpower in the world, but it no longer solely dominates the international order.

China has rise to become the most important up-and-coming contender to challenge the US hegemonic influence in East Asia region. Most analysts classify China as primary driver for the change in the regional hierarchy of the states due to its fast growing economic trajectory and the rapidly increasing military power. However, they also agree that America still shows apparent assertiveness in Asia politic, reasserting the fact that the US can prevail over China in their tussle for order shaping the region.

This dynamic compels ASEAN to posture itself as an appeasing force to manage this power competition so as to keep this region at peace, free from military conflict and with prosperity.

Factors of US re-engagement in the region

During the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) on 21 July 2009 in Phuket, Thailand, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said "the United States is back in Southeast Asia".

For the US, the return to region from 2009 was part of its strategic review, seeing that the Asia-Pacific region is contending with new and evolving challenges- from rising power and failing states, to the proliferation of nuclear and ballistic missiles, extremist violence, and new technologies that have the ability to disrupt the foundation of trade and commerce on which Asia's economic stability depends.

Mid-2010 was a watershed in this strategic review, particularly in face of China's force projection, starting from China's clash with Japan on the disputed Diaoyu (Japanese Sankaku) island in Japan's possession, protection of North Korea in Pyongyang's military attacks against South Korea in 2010,

China's accelerating military buildup largely focused on Taiwan, and more recently China's moves to legitimize South China Sea as its sovereign territory.

For Asia as whole, the US has always reiterate its enduring and consistent commitments to: free and open commerce; a just international order that emphasizes the rights and responsibilities of nations and fidelity to the rule of law; open access by all to the global common of sea, air, space, and now, cyberspace; and the principle of resolving conflict without the use of force.

From the perspective of the US, ASEAN's stability and prosperity have served its interests well. Not only that ASEAN is relevant to the US for strategic reasons, but ASEAN remains useful through its ability to steer regional processes like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus). By regularly attending these consultative meeting, the US continues to demonstrate its commitment toward the strengthening a comprehensive relations with ASEAN and constructively engage other major players in the region through these regional security frameworks.

Equally important, ASEAN's commitment to free trade has helped reinforce US interests in preserving an open multilateral trading system. Through ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and other initiatives, ASEAN has also spurred regional economic liberalization.

Thus, by maintaining meaningful relationship with the US, ASEAN is able to benefit not only from economic engagement through the US-ASEAN Trade and Investment Framework Arrangement (TIFA) which was signed on 25 August 2006 in Kuala Lumpur but also from political and security engagement which focus on the role of the US in maintaining peace and stability in the region, nuclear non-proliferation, the Korean Peninsula and other regional security issues which might arrive from China's rise.

Conclusion

It is crucial for ASEAN to posture its strategic position in such a way to accommodate the emergence of a newly rising power competing for dominance against the current hegemony.

ASEAN need to address effectively both economic and strategic challenges facing this region. Special attention should be given to the security challenges as China, with its increase economic and military posture, may see the US seeking to get involve in Southeast Asia as constraining to China's rise.

Being non hegemonic, non reliance on formal platform, and inclusive, the ASEAN regional processes have three key roles to play to appease the looming big power rivalry and avoid the undesirable security challenge.

First, ASEAN, by maintaining its unity, can use its institutions to reinforce the Sino-ASEAN relations by persuading China to adopt a policy based on cooperation rather than balance of power. A strategy that involve keeping the engagement and expanding the relations with each other, managing effectively their economic interdependence and political-security interest by using both existing bilateral and multilateral mechanism.

Second, while some ASEAN countries appreciate a need to have the US balances China, but as whole, they are reluctant to be drawn into a cross fire between the two giants. ASEAN process of engagement with the US should avoid directly testing the Chinese policy of a "peaceful rise"; thereby

avoid embracing the view that China's rise would trigger a power transition dynamic that would lead to war with the United States. Instead, ASEAN should endeavor to facilitate the transformation of China on the issue of multilateralism to participate actively in the ASEAN Regional Forum or other regional arrangements. ASEAN could also play strategically a more neutral role vis-à-vis its involvement with the US, by avoiding a policy of hedging or containing rising China.

Third, to ensure peaceful environment and prevent conflict from happening, ASEAN should avoid making a clear cut in choosing side in the US-China antagonism, but instead use its style of regionalism to prescribe Chinese behavior, while opening up the region for the US to come in constructively to ensure that China's rise has been a process in check. ASEAN member countries should stay away from the reliance on external military force to change the status quo, but can resort to it only as an effective deterrence. Hence a brinkmanship style of confrontation in the South China Sea will only escalate the tension and to diffuse it, ASEAN and China must agree urgently on the proposed Code of Conduct to cool down the tension and pave the way for future peaceful resolution of the maritime dispute.

In this way, ASEAN as a regional organization, can and will ensure smooth cooperation for a more peaceful solution to the security challenge amidst the emergence of big power rivalry in the region thereby contribute to world peace and development.