



ASEANFocus



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Can the East Asia Summit Continue to Prop up ASEAN Centrality?

BY VICTOR SUMSKY

When the 1st East Asia Summit (EAS) was convened in Kuala Lumpur in 2005, it was not supposed to deal with regional security issues, probably because its founding member states were apprehensive that focusing on sensitive regional security matters might result not so much in agreements and cooperation, but in deeper divisions among them.

Neither the US nor Russia were among the founding member states. While the former seemed disinterested in joining, the latter did apply for membership but was denied it on the grounds that it did not have ‘substantial’ relations with East Asian partners, primarily in terms of trade and investment. However, five years later, following the EAS’s decision to discuss security, the Americans and Russians were both invited to join in 2011.

Behind the decision to expand the EAS membership and its agenda was ASEAN’s concern that, in spite of all the economic interdependency between East Asian countries, the conflict potential of the region was growing. A wider and mutually neutralising presence of major powers was probably viewed as a means of arresting this trend – and of sustaining ASEAN’s much-valued regional centrality. Disturbing as some of them were, political changes in the area were still proceeding in a more or less evolutionary way. As long as East Asia was economically doing what it was doing, things still looked tolerable and there seemed to be enough time ahead for a calculated, step-by-step movement towards the new regional security architecture.

“Adherence to the principle of ASEAN centrality was emphasised by all ASEAN’s dialogue partners without exception and there is an underlying feeling that the practical maintenance of this ASEAN centrality is turning into an uphill task.”

Today, in late 2015, what is the situation following the recent series of ASEAN Summits in Malaysia? Yes, the ASEAN Community has been launched as expected; and a number of new Action Plans and the Road Map for 2016-2025 are there to prove that ASEAN remains determined to deepen and diversify its connectivity. The 10th EAS did not fail to denounce violent extremism, and stressed the need to confront the Islamic State by preaching moderation on a global scale. Neither did it ignore the imperative of regional maritime cooperation and the situation in the South China Sea.

Against this background, adherence to the principle of ASEAN centrality was emphasised by all ASEAN’s dialogue partners without exception. Yet, there is an underlying feeling that the practical maintenance of this ASEAN centrality is turning into an uphill task. The so-called Asian paradox (the phenomenon of sharpening strategic rivalries between close economic partners), and the increasing complexity and ever-quickening pace of development in the region are hardly conducive to a stronger ASEAN solidarity. Suffice it to say that on the eve of the Kuala Lumpur summits, four out of the ten ASEAN members chose to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) led by the United States instead of waiting for the launch of ASEAN’s own Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Soon after that, the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) failed to work out a joint position regarding the new round of tensions in the South China Sea.

Is ASEAN centrality – and with it the whole set of dialogue platforms based on it – in jeopardy? If so, what exactly can be done to bring the operation of the EAS (as well as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ADMM Plus) in line with the changing realities? In the absence of serious responses to these and related questions East Asia’s future may not turn out to be as bright and predictable as many people still anticipate. ■

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