

Facilitating China-U.S. Relations in the Age of Rebalancing: ASEAN's "Middle Power" Diplomacy

See Seng Tan
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies
Nanyang Technological University

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The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158
Jung-gu, Seoul 100-786
Republic of Korea
Tel 82 2 2277 1683
Fax 82 2 2277 1684



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I. Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been lauded for its contributions to the regional security and stability of not just Southeast Asia, but of East Asia as well. In the East Asian context, a key part of ASEAN's contribution – some would say the only contribution of note – has been to institutionalize political-security dialogue among the world's powers, great as well as regional, and the ASEAN member nations. This institutionalization of political dialogue was possible through regional security arrangements such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and, more recently, the East Asia Summit (EAS), as well as ASEAN's dialogue partnerships with China and the United States respectively. If the Cold War goal of NATO, as its first Secretary-General Lord Ismay famously said, was to “to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down,”¹ then a post-Cold War goal of ASEAN, at least for its founding member states (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, and Thailand), has arguably been to keep the Americans involved in the region, keep rising Chinese assertiveness in check, and keep ASEAN in charge of regional architecture in East Asia.² For ASEAN, the aim has been to ensure the great and regional powers engage the region in pacific and positive ways that contribute to the region's peace and prosperity without undermining ASEAN's *primus inter pares* position within the regional order and the architecture that supports it. And the key to that, ASEAN leaders believe, is to ensure that the China-U.S. relationship, despite its propensity for bilateral competition and possibly even conflict, would essentially remain peaceful, cooperative, and conducive to the peace, prosperity, and security of Asia.



Arguably, relations between China and the United States have evolved into a pattern of mutual strategic hedging. As Evan Medeiros has noted: “It allows Washington and Beijing each to maintain its extensive and mutually beneficial economic ties with each other and with the rest of Asia while addressing uncertainty and growing security concerns about the other.”³ But while mutual hedging can help prevent geopolitical rivalry from escalating into serious conflict, it remains a delicate and potentially unstable strategy whose effectiveness and sustainability requires judicious management of growing strains in China-U.S. ties and regional reactions to Chinese and American policies, *inter alia*.⁴ Thus understood, ASEAN diplomacy aimed at facilitating big power relations is designed to foster a conducive institutional environment wherein mutual strategic hedging between China and the United States can be reinforced through consultation and confidence-building. In themselves, ASEAN-led multilateral consultative mechanisms are not a basis for strategic hedging, but are designed to keep outside powers involved in regional security dialogue and to provide Beijing and Washington with places and spaces where the security dilemmas that threaten the durability and effectiveness of their mutual hedging can be managed and hopefully mitigated.⁵ But are ASEAN’s consultative platforms equally durable and effective in fulfilling their remit, not least when the organization’s “centrality” in Asian regionalism is under question? Can an ASEAN stained by internal disharmony and strained by growing pressures to deliver an effective regional architecture still be useful as, if you will, “Sherpa” to the big powers?

The aim of this paper is to review and assess ASEAN’s historical and contemporary role in facilitating China-U.S. ties toward, at the very least, peaceful strategic competition, if not outright cooperation. Paradoxically, China-U.S. competition and cooperation can equally be the bane of ASEAN’s efforts in this regard. While ASEAN-based multilateral diplomacy and regional cooperation in Asia have served Chinese and American interests, their utility has of late diminished as a consequence of two related developments. On the one hand, tensions between China and the United States have risen, brought about by the post-Afghanistan strategic “rebalancing” of the United States to the Asia-Pacific region. So, too, have tensions between China and some Southeast Asian rival claimants to South China Sea islands and waters. On the other hand, divergent perceptions and perspectives among ASEAN member states, exacerbated by centrifugal pulls exerted on ASEAN by the two great powers – and rendered worse by China-U.S. tensions – have contributed to marked cleavages within the regional organization. Ironically, the creeping institutionalization of China-U.S. cooperation, with the bilateral Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) process in particular, can prove equally problematic for ASEAN’s facilitating role should that development end up rendering the organization’s services defunct. However,



it is neither in China's nor America's interest to adopt a "G2" approach to regional governance, and hitherto there has been no hint at all that President Xi Jinping's call for "a new type of great power relations" implies that the Chinese desire such an approach.⁶ In that respect, ASEAN diplomacy still matters.

A brief conceptual note is in order at this juncture. Broadly, there are three ways to define a middle power – according to capabilities, function, or behavior. Middle power diplomacy generally involves the adoption of an internationalist perspective and policy, actively participating in multilateral forums, leading in specific niche areas, and acting as a bridge among nations.⁷ There are countless reasons why ASEAN should not be equated with a middle power, not least because it is neither a unitary state actor nor, for that matter, a unitary regional actor. That said, with a combined population of well over six hundred million and substantial economic heft, and with the anticipated establishment of the sixteen-country Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) – the hub of what would be the world's largest free trade area – ASEAN arguably possesses the material requisites to function like a middle power. And if middle powers are, according to one seminal contribution, "defined primarily by their behavior"⁸ – characterized principally, though not exclusively by the penchant for multilateralism – then the way by which ASEAN promotes and protects its interests through negotiating with, rather than simply obeying or resisting, great powers suggests behavioral similarities between ASEAN-style diplomacy and middle power diplomacy *vis-à-vis* great powers.⁹

II. The Great Powers Rebalance in Asia

In November 2011, President Barack Obama announced the plan to conduct rotational deployments of up to 2,500 U.S. Marines in Darwin, Australia, during his speech before the Australian Parliament in Canberra. Another agreement was reached by the United States with Singapore in June 2011 on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD), an annual semi-official defense forum held in Singapore, to allow the deployment of up to four U.S. Navy Littoral Combat Ships – up from the two vessels previously agreed upon – to Singapore.¹⁰ At the SLD in June 2012, U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta reported that the U.S. Navy will reposition sixty percent of its assets to the Asia-Pacific region by 2020.¹¹ Crucially, the proclivity of some governments – the Chinese, in particular – and a number of pundits to portray the so-called strategic "pivot" or "rebalancing" as predominantly military in orientation



has been questioned by others who highlight, correctly, the complex and comprehensive scope of America's reorientation to Asia. The pivot includes economic, multilateral-diplomatic, and, arguably, democratic dimensions – as reflected, respectively, by the Obama Administration's participation in the TPP and membership in the EAS, and its engagement with liberalizing Myanmar.¹²

Fairly or otherwise, China sees a nefarious U.S. design behind these other dimensions aimed ostensibly to constrain its rise, whether in the form of a high-quality, regional trade pact (TPP) that seeks to exclude China – for now at least – or a regional grouping (EAS) that Beijing treats as a direct competitor to the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) in which it enjoys preponderance. That said, it is understandable why the military dimension of the rebalancing strategy has attracted more attention than the other dimensions, not least because of the critical implications that it could have on Chinese territorial claims over the East China Sea and the South China Sea (the latter of which has been dubbed a “Beijing lake” by Japanese leader Shinzo Abe¹³). More recently, while reductions to the Pentagon's budget under “sequestration” and the forced shutdown of the federal government in October 2013 have raised questions about Washington's ability to deliver on military rebalancing, U.S. leaders have been quick to reassure America's allies and security partners that such setbacks would not diminish its commitment to Asia.¹⁴

But it is not only the United States that is rebalancing, if that means a visible change in its policy and strategy toward Asia (or, in the case of Asian countries, toward the rest of Asia). In a sense, Japanese leader Abe's turn to Southeast Asia – described roundly as an effort to “counter China”¹⁵ – amounts to a rebalancing of sorts, as is Australia's expressed desire to engage Asia more deeply (as discussed in its 2012 white paper, *Australia in the Asian Century*) and exploit the economic opportunities afforded by “proximity.”¹⁶ As for China, in the light of its recent assertiveness in both the East China and South China Seas, it is easy to forget the so-called “charm offensive” promoted and practiced by China for much of the first decade of this century.¹⁷ By 2009, Beijing's charm offensive had pretty much evaporated in Asia in the wake of China's submission of its nine-dashed/dotted-line map to the United Nations on May 7. In December that same year, China scored a political victory over America and the industrialized West at the world climate change talks in Copenhagen by reportedly blocking open negotiations, although blame for the failed talks fell squarely on Obama and Western leaders.¹⁸ Whether these developments are tied to China-U.S. spats in the South China Sea involving the *USNS Impeccable* and *USNS Victorious* in early March 2009 is unclear.¹⁹ As Bonnie Glaser has noted, “Freedom of navigation in the region is ... a contentious issue, especially between the United States and China over the right of U.S. military vessels to operate in China's two-hundred-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ).”²⁰



There are grounds to suggest the shift from the charm offensive to the *anni horribiles* of 2009–2011, marked by spats between China and a number of territorial claimants, was in a fundamental sense brought on by Chinese concerns over America’s rebalancing strategy and the consequent emboldening that it has presumably induced in the stance of Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam toward China.²¹ For instance, the noted scholar and Bush administration official, Thomas Christensen, has distinguished between the “good old days” of China as a “responsible stakeholder” and its recent “abrasive” behavior as it reacted to “unwelcome and unforeseen events that have often been initiated by others.”²² At the Sunnylands summit with President Obama in early June 2013, President Xi memorably noted that the Pacific Ocean is vast enough to accommodate both China and the United States – a statement aimed presumably at persuading Washington to acknowledge Beijing’s sovereign interests in the region and to keep out of its disputes with neighbors in the East China and South China Seas.²³

III. Establishing and Extending the ASEAN Model of Diplomacy

Proactive engagement of the major powers is a strategy toward which ASEAN, as a matter of institutional policy, has had to gradually evolve, not least when its political epicenter, Indonesia, openly embraced nonalignment. Such a perspective separated Indonesia from its fellow ASEAN members, which still valued access to extra-regional sources of countervailing power²⁴ – for example, the Philippines and Thailand as formal allies of the United States, in addition to Malaysia and Singapore with Britain and Australia as part of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA).²⁵ For the latter two ASEAN countries, Malaysia and Singapore, the experience of confrontation with Indonesia contributed to a jaundiced view of Jakarta’s formula of “regional solution to regional problems” as a potential pretext for regional hegemony.²⁶ The formation of ASEAN as such was viewed by its founders as a regional framework wherein a political (or what international theorists might call “soft”²⁷) balance could be informally instituted, with Indonesia as the member whose hegemonic aspirations needed to be restrained.

But all this would not have been conceivable unless Indonesia volitionally acceded to the imposition of institutional constraints on it by its fellow ASEAN states. President Suharto clearly understood that the way to restore confidence and stability in archipelagic Southeast Asia was for Indonesia to demonstrate good faith to its neighbors by participat-



ing in “a structure of multilateral partnership and constraint”²⁸ and assuming responsibilities for regional order as the effective first among equals. In short, it required a sustained effort by Indonesia in political self-denial in the interest of regional order before ASEAN could even be established, let alone succeed. This strategic insight would not only be Indonesia’s alone to bear and act upon, but it was also, as scholars as varied as Hedley Bull and G. John Ikenberry have noted over the years, the lot of the United States since the end of the Second World War²⁹ – at least until, arguably, the post-Cold War years of American unipolarity and unilateralism under U.S. presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush.³⁰ Hence, quite apart from the usual descriptions of the “ASEAN Way” as one of consensus, consultation, informality, and the unequivocal commitment to sovereignty norms, in terms of strategic ends the ASEAN Way is equally, if not more, about expectations regarding the commitment of big countries to self-restraint and even self-denial.

It is precisely this model of regional diplomacy and security that ASEAN, in the light of its own historical experience, has sought to bequeath to the post-Cold War Asian region, where the small and weak members of ASEAN find themselves faced by even bigger and more powerful states, not least China and presumably India. As Leifer, discussing the strategic motivations behind the decision to establish the ARF, has argued: “The extent to which Indonesia’s example of political self-denial in the interest of regional order may be emulated within the wider Asia-Pacific is central to any parallel between ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum.”³¹ The formation of the ARF in 1994 also marked Indonesia’s *de facto* transition from a strategic preference for regional neutrality and nonalignment to an open security regionalism, one that complements the open economic regionalism which Indonesia and the ASEAN states had formally embraced with their participation in APEC.³² More than anything else, it is ASEAN’s formative experience and the lessons its members learned in engaging powerful players, persuading them toward self-restraint and giving them a legitimate stake in Asian regionalism – one defined by ASEAN, crucially³³ – which informs its strategy for facilitating China-U.S. ties.

IV. ASEAN-based Modalities for Facilitating China-U.S. Ties

The use of the APEC, ARF, and most recently the EAS for bringing together the big powers and regional countries is something championed not only by ASEAN but middle powers as well, which equally value the institutionalization of dialogue with other region-



al stakeholders. As Australia's former prime minister, Paul Keating, once mused about Australia's nearly non-existent role in multilateral diplomacy before the post-Cold War era, "In no multilateral fora would our Prime Minister sit with the leaders of the United States, Japan, China, Indonesia or any of the states of South East Asia. The leadership of those countries occupied a world beyond us."³⁴ Through its facilitation of "meeting places"³⁵ – Asians are spoiled with choices due to the region's many multilateral dialogue forums – and, arguably, through appropriate conventions and norms of engagement, ASEAN (and the middle powers that support its central role) have sought to indirectly broker enhanced dialogue and conflict management between China and the United States. For example, as this author has argued elsewhere, in the context of the China-Taiwan crisis in March 1996, which saw the deployment of two U.S. aircraft carriers in the Taiwan Straits: "The ARF provided an avenue for dialogue between the United States and China," despite the ARF's failure to formally implement preventive diplomacy. "It can therefore be argued that by acting as a vehicle for consultation, the ARF contributed, if only indirectly, to the de-escalation of the crisis."³⁶

To be sure, the ARF has witnessed its fair share of reprimands and recriminations directed by member countries at one another. At the ARF meeting in July 2010, the former Chinese foreign minister, Yang Jiechi, warned Southeast Asian states against coordinating with outside powers in managing territorial disputes with China.³⁷ But while countries such as Australia and Japan, both of which played instrumental roles in helping to get both the APEC and ARF up and running, proved enthusiastic participants from the start, the major powers needed more convincing. On the one hand, Beijing initially saw those regional arrangements as instruments for the West to constrain and possibly even contain China's rise. On the other hand, Washington did not see any need for multilateral mechanisms given its traditional preference for bilateralism with Asian states.

However, both big powers, in their own ways and for their own reasons, came to value ASEAN-led regionalism – the Chinese perhaps more so than the Americans. China grew to appreciate ASEAN-led institutions as platforms through which it could promote its "peaceful rise,"³⁸ much as Indonesia found, in the early days of ASEAN, a regional framework through which it could consensually exercise its regional leadership and legitimately promote its vision for an indigenous regionalism.³⁹ Moreover, the consensus-based "ASEAN Way" on which East Asia's regional institutions rely has also served as a useful convention by which China (or any other country for that matter) can effectively delay or "neutralize" regional initiatives it deems inimical to its interests.⁴⁰ China's early and relatively positive experiences in ASEAN-based regionalism encouraged an increased participation in international institutions more generally.⁴¹ China, the first external power



to accede to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), established a free trade pact with ASEAN and signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) with ASEAN in 2002. The high point of Chinese support for ASEAN-led regional architecture was the formation of ASEAN Plus Three (APT), which in a sense strengthened East Asian perceptions of China as a regional leader and a public goods provider that could potentially rival America in the light of the dismay some regional countries felt at the high-handed treatment they received from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Washington in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis.⁴²

Indeed, such was Beijing's initial enthusiasm for the East Asia Summit when it was first proposed that the Chinese were reportedly caught off-guard by the strong support of some ASEAN countries for the inclusion of Australia, New Zealand, and India to the EAS when it was formally inaugurated in December 2005 – a decision that contradicted Beijing's assumption that only APT members (comprising the ten ASEAN countries, plus China, Japan, and South Korea) would logically make up the membership of the EAS.⁴³ Moreover, in seeking to reconcile China's preference for the East Asia Free Trade Agreement (EAFTA) and the Japan-sponsored Comprehensive Economic Partnership for East Asia (CEPEA),⁴⁴ ASEAN paved the way for the proposed formation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) at the 2012 EAS meeting.⁴⁵ Although the RCEP has been interpreted by some as ASEAN's concessionary gesture to China given the latter's suspicions regarding the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as an American ploy to frustrate China, its membership and name imply an affinity with the CEPEA rather than the EAFTA. Despite these "snubs" (if they could be called that), the Chinese nonetheless shared common cause with ASEAN in refusing to support Australian leader Kevin Rudd's proposal, introduced in 2008, for a new regional architecture.⁴⁶

On its part, the United States initially harbored doubts about participating in multilateral diplomacy in post-Cold War Asia. The Clinton administration relented when it realized its Asian counterparts had no intentions of severing their bilateral security alliances and economic ties with the United States, but, rather, regarded the emerging regional architecture as a supplementary structure that would ideally complement the existing bilateral structures. For ASEAN, American support for the APEC and ARF underscored Washington's willingness to deeply engage the Asian region. It was President Clinton who invited heads of government to the APEC meeting in Seattle, which led to the upgrading of the trade forum from a gathering of economic ministers to a leaders' summit. "We have to develop new institutional arrangements that support our national economic and security interests internationally," Clinton noted in 1993. "We're working to build a prosperous and peaceful Asia-Pacific region through our work here in APEC."⁴⁷



Though the relatively modest agenda of APEC contributed to “business facilitation,” Asian anger at the IMF and the United States in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis led, however, to a weakening in East Asian commitment to APEC.⁴⁸ Indeed, even prior to the 1997 crisis, there was already regional apprehension over APEC as “a tool for U.S. regional domination.”⁴⁹

With the beginning of George W. Bush’s presidency and the emergence of the U.S.-led global war on terror in the post-9/11 era, counterterrorism came to dominate the agendas of regional arrangements. While China responded with initial skepticism (especially when APEC met in Shanghai in October 2001),⁵⁰ counterterrorism cooperation between China and the United States – the symbolism as much as, if not more than, the reality of it, since by most accounts actual bilateral cooperation was limited at best⁵¹ – provided the basis for a tacit agreement between the two big powers that allowed both to pursue their respective security agendas with relatively little interference from the other. Meanwhile, President Bush’s Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s uneven attendance at ARF meetings and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s express preference for a mission-oriented, coalitions-of-the-willing approach to international cooperation⁵² generated untold consternation among America’s Asian partners over the Bush Administration’s apparent lack of support for Asian regionalism. With the Obama presidency, however, the United States redressed its perceived neglect of the region by acceding to the TAC and joining the EAS in 2011. In a widely-cited speech given in October 2012, in which Secretary of State Hillary Clinton referred to ASEAN as a “fulcrum for the region’s emerging regional architecture,” Clinton declared America’s intentions to “sustain and strengthen America’s leadership in the Asia-Pacific region.”⁵³ While this might have partially assuaged regional angst over whether America would continue its support for ASEAN centrality in ASEAN regionalism, it also raised expectations regarding the regional architecture’s ability to “produce results,” as Clinton had emphasized in her speech.⁵⁴ For a brand of regionalism that has principally favored process over progress,⁵⁵ the Obama administration’s focus on results is a litmus test, especially for an ASEAN given increasingly to division and disunity.

In this respect, the annual S&ED arrangement – undergirded by presidential summitry of the formal sort or the Sunnylands “no-necktie” meeting between Obama and Xi, should that become institutionalized – could arguably develop to the point whereby the bilateral relationship no longer requires the kind of brokering or middleman role hitherto performed by ASEAN. “There is an underlying assumption that the relationship between these two great powers will determine the future Asia-Pacific order,” Julio Amador observed. In such a context, Amador argues that ASEAN’s role “as the platform of dialogue



for external powers has been diminished.”⁵⁶ As things stand, however, both Beijing and Washington have dispelled the notion of a “G2,” where the two great powers would supposedly forge “a two nation clearinghouse for international disputes.”⁵⁷ Prior to the S&ED of 2012, then Chinese State Councilor Dai Bingguo noted that, “China is not seeking after G2, but is willing to build C2, or the two in coordination with the U.S.” – a prospect offered by the S&ED and ancillary bilateral processes between the two countries.⁵⁸ Such a “C2” relationship could well form part of the “new type of great power relations” which Xi appears to be seeking to develop with the United States.

It is unlikely that ASEAN multilateral diplomacy will no longer be required even if China-U.S. relations experience a reset to the C2, if not quite the G2. Despite varying interpretations of the structural drivers underpinning American and Chinese strategic concerns and intentions, there is broad agreement among observers that the ways China and the United States approach their relationship are fundamentally different, even if those observers disagree over what precisely those differing approaches might be. For instance, Australian strategic thinker Hugh White argued: “The U.S. is the status quo power, and its position is that it can manage issues within the framework that exists. China, you would expect as the revisionary, rising power, would seek fundamental change in the parameters of the relationship.”⁵⁹ On the other hand, Robert Zoellick, the former American senior diplomat and World Bank president, has portrayed the United States, rather than China, as the revisionist power: “The situation is historically unusual. Although the U.S. is the established power, its policies do not maintain the status quo but instead promote change that advances American ideals and interests. Although China is the rising power, its policies are guided by traditional views of order and nonintervention.”⁶⁰ While increased information sharing and discussion between Beijing and Washington could help to bridge the perception gap, it nonetheless leaves open the door for ASEAN to play an interlocutory role. Nor would it be in the interest of other regional countries, not least U.S. allies such as Australia, Japan, and South Korea – for whom China remains a key trading partner – if a China-U.S. strategic condominium emerges. For these middle/regional powers, ensuring that ASEAN and ASEAN-led consultative mechanisms retain their relevance in facilitating a cooperative and peaceful China-U.S. relationship makes good sense and smart policy. While the present season of rebalancing will undoubtedly continue to vex the region, there has hitherto been no indication that China or the United States is abandoning their mutual hedging. To that end, ASEAN diplomacy still matters – a reality whose acknowledgement by the organization’s members has to be accompanied by modesty and collective action rather than complacency, disunity, and indecision.



V. Whither ASEAN Centrality?

The debacle at the ASEAN ministerial meeting in Phnom Penh in July 2012, where ASEAN ministers failed for the first time to produce a customary communiqué, proved a stark reminder that ASEAN could still be held hostage by great power “interference” directed toward specific member countries of the organization despite forty-five years of progressive regionalism. While ASEAN presumably still enjoys the region’s endorsement, it has become clear that today not all are prepared to entrust the future of regionalism to ASEAN alone. But such backing does not come free, and the Americans have made clear that they expect to see real results rather than institutional superfluity.⁶¹ Presumably burned by the EAS experience and angered by certain ASEAN members over the South China Sea claims, the Chinese have grown increasingly impatient and disillusioned with ASEAN. Moreover, other non-ASEAN countries that regularly participate in ASEAN-led institutions have chafed at the “second-class treatment”⁶² they purportedly received at the hands of ASEAN, adding to their growing frustration over the apparent inefficacy of the existing regional architecture and ASEAN’s perceived ineptitude in managing and leading the regional architecture. More than any time since ASEAN’s ascendance to the apex of post-Cold War regional diplomacy, the organization risks squandering its hard-won political capital with outside powers and losing their support altogether.

But it is not only outsiders who feel frustrated. While Jakarta has played an inimitable role in ASEAN leadership, some of its most fervent ASEAN advocates have grown increasingly impatient with obdurate fellow member countries. “If other ASEAN countries do not share Indonesia’s passion for and commitment to ASEAN, then it is indeed time for us to start another round of debate on the merits of a post-ASEAN foreign policy,” Rizal Sukma, executive director of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Jakarta, noted. “We have many other important foreign policy agendas to attend to other than just whining and agonizing over ASEAN’s failures.”⁶³

ASEAN centrality is the assumption that ASEAN should rightfully be the hub and driving force behind the evolving regional architecture of the Asia-Pacific region.⁶⁴ As Ernest Bower has put it, ASEAN “is the glue that binds key actors together, either through direct membership or via regional structures such as the ASEAN+1, ASEAN+3, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+), East Asia Summit (EAS), and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).”⁶⁵ The ASEAN Charter stresses the need to “maintain the centrality and proactive role of ASEAN as the primary driving force in its relations and cooperation with its external partners in a regional architecture that is open, transparent and inclusive.”⁶⁶ Thus understood, the maintenance of



centrality is vital if ASEAN were to successfully engage outside powers in ways beneficial to Southeast Asians and with the help of ASEAN-centered modalities. But can ASEAN, to borrow Bower's analogy, continue to glue all regional stakeholders together when the organization itself risks coming unglued? Indeed, has ASEAN's pursuit of centrality become an end in itself? For that matter, is ASEAN centrality essential to Southeast Asia? Member countries themselves appear divided on the matter, not least where their practical attitudes and actions are concerned. When asked privately, leading ASEAN watchers and practitioners often point, among other things, to the divide between the founding member nations and the newer members that joined the organization in the 1990s. Granted, ASEAN's founding members (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) have enjoyed a long period of bonding and deep familiarity not - yet - shared by later entrants such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. The former are clearly not without their differences, but they have learned over the years to shelve them and circle their wagons in support of a member nation in need, as happened for Thailand following Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia in the 1980s, or Myanmar since it joined ASEAN in 1997.⁶⁷

Nor have ASEAN states' responses to Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea disputes and U.S. rebalancing suggested coherence - much less coordination among the ASEAN members. Against the fluid backdrop of economic, political and security rebalancing by multiple powers, there is evidence to suggest that a number of regional countries arguably abandoned, if only momentarily during the tense period of 2009–2011, their traditional adherence to strategic hedging.⁶⁸ Crucially, not every territorial claimant in the South China Sea has necessarily taken advantage of U.S. rebalancing and adopted forceful responses to perceived Chinese assertiveness. For example, while Brunei and Malaysia have taken umbrage with China's territorial claims, they have sought to avoid public criticism of China while supporting the quest for a unified ASEAN position on the disputes.⁶⁹ On the other hand, the Philippines and Vietnam have done the exact opposite. Manila clearly regards its security alliance with the United States as the basis for it to presume on and push for American military backing should it get into a fight with Beijing in the South China Sea.⁷⁰ Exactly a year later, Manila took its dispute with China to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), a sign of the former's frustration at the slow pace of regional diplomacy. Beijing has hitherto refused to entertain the request, even though a decision could be taken in absentia. While Vietnam's current problems with China over their South China Sea disputes imply a robust embrace by Vietnam of American rebalancing, the difference between Vietnam and the Philippines is that the Vietnamese, though equally disappointed by ASEAN inaction, are cautious of overreliance on the Americans and seek to retain a strategic autonomy and nimbleness should



the United States end up threatening Vietnamese interests in the future.⁷¹ Among the non-claimants, Indonesia has underscored its longstanding policy not to side with any major power,⁷² whereas Singapore has reiterated its support for the continued presence of the United States in the region, agreed to the rotational deployment of U.S. Navy Littoral Combat Ships to Singapore, and pressed for the protection of the freedom of navigation in regional waters.⁷³ Finally, while Cambodia showed its readiness to side with China over its ASEAN colleagues vis-à-vis the South China Sea disputes, one Cambodian analyst has argued that the negative attention on Cambodia was unfair in the light of what Cambodia's chairmanship in 2012 was able to accomplish for ASEAN.⁷⁴

Endless rhetoric aside, the preservation of ASEAN unity, oddly enough, is not a key priority in the foreign policies of ASEAN states, certainly not all of the time and not especially when their national interests have been directly at odds with those of the organization. Such parochialism at the expense of institutional accord has hitherto not posed serious difficulties for Southeast Asia; in any case, member states rarely see ASEAN as an institution of first resort for meeting their vital interests.⁷⁵ Of late, however, Southeast Asian leaders have acknowledged with greater urgency the need for a strong and united ASEAN if their respective economies and societies are to avoid being left behind in an increasingly competitive and complex global milieu. Also, episodes such as the Phnom Penh debacle in 2012 or the Cambodian-Thai border conflict in 2011 reflect ASEAN members' tendency to undermine the organization's ongoing – and, by a former ASEAN secretary-general's admission, difficult and likely to be delayed⁷⁶ – transformation into an economic and political-security community. Needless to say, a divided and weak ASEAN is inimical to ASEAN centrality. No claim to centrality makes sense if the presumed centerpiece and cornerstone of the regional architecture itself, ASEAN, cannot keep itself together. And without its central position in the regional architecture, Southeast Asians stand to lose their prerogative to define the content of Asia-Pacific regionalism and shape its course in ways that would benefit themselves foremost.

VI. Conclusion

This paper has sought to highlight the role played by ASEAN, by way of the regional architecture and consultative mechanisms it has developed and sustained, to facilitate China-U.S. ties toward, at the very least, peaceful strategic competition, if not outright coop-



eration. In recent years, that role has been complicated by strategic and diplomatic rebalancing not just on the part of America but equally China, and the bit parts played by Southeast Asian countries in shaping and being shaped by the big powers' actions. Growing competition and rivalry between China and the United States, and the impact that has had and continues to have on the individual policies and actions of Southeast Asian countries, have clearly complicated things for ASEAN. In a different sense, rebalancing by both the Americans and the Chinese, by forcing Asian countries to take sides, threatens not only the delicate mutual hedging between Beijing and Washington, but equally the integrity of ASEAN as an honest broker and competent facilitator of the China-U.S. relationship. On the other hand, recent developments appear to suggest China is prepared to countenance a "charm offensive 2.0" toward Southeast Asia, as attested by China's readiness to work with ASEAN to develop a code of conduct for the South China Sea and separate visits by both President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang in October 2013 to various Southeast Asian capitals bearing gifts of trade and investment deals.⁷⁷ That these visits coincided with U.S. President Obama's decision to cancel his participation at the APEC Summit and the East Asia Summit only served to underscore Beijing's determined effort to restore (rebalance?) confidence among the ASEAN states, even as the U.S. Congress seems equally determined, if only indirectly, to scuttle U.S. rebalancing.⁷⁸

Against that backdrop, what are the immediate- to intermediate-term policy implications for ASEAN middle power diplomacy? At least three ramifications are noteworthy.

1. Fluidity in great power relations is both risky and opportune for ASEAN diplomacy.

As has been noted, so complex and fluid have the developments been that pundits cannot agree on who precisely is doing what. While the Xi presidency has indicated its desire to see a new style of big power relations with the United States (and presumably with other key powers as well), there is little agreement among observers on the context and conditions under which that change, if it happens, is to occur, much less on what the new rules of the road in great power relations might be. As has been discussed, actions undertaken by both the Chinese and the Americans have strained intra-ASEAN unity. However challenging that has been for ASEAN, this period of transition is equally a period of opportunity for the regional organization so long as the rules in great power relations remain relatively ill-defined. Granted, should China and the United States both agree to a role for ASEAN in shaping regional security, then there is less for ASEAN to worry about. However, should the bilateral relationship move toward a condominium-like arrangement,



then the risk of ASEAN's marginalization, if not exclusion, becomes more likely. But so long as the China-U.S. relationship remains uncertain, then this furnishes ASEAN the opportunity to define a remit for itself that would assure the organization a legitimate place and welcomed role in great power relations in Asia in the foreseeable future.

2. Lack of regional consensus for a new regional architecture and/or concert of powers underscores ASEAN's default relevance to Asian regionalism.

Neither China nor the United States supported past proposals by middle or regional powers, notably Australia and Japan, for a new regional architecture or (in the Australian case) a concert-of-powers arrangement. Superstructures of the sort envisioned in Kevin Rudd's "Asia Pacific Community" idea and Yukio Hatoyama's "East Asian Community" idea, introduced in 2008 and 2009, respectively, presumably constrain the freedom of great powers, whereas concert arrangements force great powers to share power with other countries. Moreover, for Beijing, the recent revelation that a key motivation behind the Rudd vision had apparently been the containment of China only confirmed the wisdom of their decision.⁷⁹ Notwithstanding the *ex post facto* suggestion by some that the expanded membership of the EAS effectively constitutes the realization of Rudd's vision,⁸⁰ the lack of support from the Chinese and the Americans for new architectures and/or power-sharing arrangements that either exclude or marginalize ASEAN is certainly good news for the regional organization. As Tommy Koh, the veteran Singaporean diplomat and self-professed ASEAN enthusiast, has put it: "ASEAN is acceptable to all the stakeholders as the region's convener and facilitator because it is neutral, pragmatic and welcoming."⁸¹ Presumably, both China and the United States find ASEAN "acceptable" because the institution's inherent weakness makes it non-threatening to the rest of the stakeholders, great power or otherwise.

3. ASEAN's continued relevance to regional order and architecture in Asia requires the organization to transcend from convener into leadership in ideas facilitation and policy coordination.

Even if we accept that ASEAN's big power diplomacy still matters where the future stability of China-U.S. ties are concerned, can or should ASEAN remain a glorified convener and facilitator of regional relations? While there is no doubt that the organization contributed significantly to post-Cold War Asia-Pacific security by furnishing regional mechanisms for consultation and dialogue, others have also been offering their popular



wares, such as the Shangri-La Dialogue – which has been viewed by some, fairly or otherwise, as a direct competitor to the ADMM+8.⁸² Appropriately, ASEAN needs to go beyond being just an institutional facilitator and become a proactive intellectual facilitator (i.e., a progenitor of good, actionable policy ideas). Certainly, ASEAN has never been short on ideas, visions, and conceptual road maps. But the collective will and the responsibility to implement them are clearly things that the organization could do more. ASEAN must judiciously exploit its centrality to affect change in Asia-Pacific regionalism where needed and consolidate the elements that benefit the region. According to an analyst: “ASEAN has the strategic position to drive this change, but it will take new levels of political courage and coordination, institutionalized regional structures, and unprecedented levels of proactive diplomacy. ASEAN’s responsibility is clear.”⁸³ So, too, are the manifold challenges that stand in its way. The key remains the ability and willingness of ASEAN, despite its differences, to cohere and act in collective fashion as and when needed. With China’s evident change in strategy – initiating another charm offensive toward Southeast Asia just as an apparent cooling off of the U.S. rebalancing strategy is taking place – suggests a new understanding in Sino-U.S. relations, at least from the Chinese perspective, could be forged based on mutual strategic restraint on the part of both major powers. Without being forced to take sides and strain their institutional cohesion, ASEAN states could work together. ■

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Endnotes

¹ Cited in Warren (2010, 18).

² Not every ASEAN leader, past and present, might fully agree with this statement. For example, Mahathir Mohamad, the former prime minister of Malaysia, memorably sought, with his East Asian Economic Grouping (later changed to Caucus) proposal, to keep the Americans and other outside powers from an economic regionalism that, if realized (it was not, for the record), would have been culturally “East Asian” (Emmers, Liow and Tan 2010).

³ Medeiros (2005/2006, 146)

⁴ Medeiros (2005/2006, 146)

⁵ Weatherbee (2007), Cha (2011)

⁶ Brzezinski (2009), Lampton (2013)

⁷ Beeson (2011), Cooper, Higgott and Nossal (1993), Harris (2009), Lee, S-J (2012), Sussex (2011)

⁸ Cooper, Higgott and Nossal (1993, 19)

⁹ Beeson (2011), White (2010)

¹⁰ Weisgerber (2012)

¹¹ BBC (2012)

¹² Lieberthal (2011), Swaine (2012)

¹³ Holmes (2013)

¹⁴ Brereton-Fukui and Otto (2013), Brown (2013)

¹⁵ Seig and Thatcher (2013)

¹⁶ Harcourt (2012)

¹⁷ Kurlantzick (2007)

¹⁸ Lynas (2009)

¹⁹ Thompson (2009)

²⁰ Glaser (2012)



²¹ Author's exchanges with various academics and policy intellectuals at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' (CASS) Institute of American Studies and Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, the Chinese Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), the China Institute for International Strategic Studies (CISS), the China Center for International Educational Exchange (CCIEE), the Central Party School, the PLA National Defense University, the China Foreign Affairs University, and the Renmin University, as well as officials from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the period July 1–7, 2012, in Beijing.

²² Christensen (2011)

²³ McGregor (2013)

²⁴ Leifer (1989, 5–6)

²⁵ Emmers (2012)

²⁶ Leifer (2000, 109)

²⁷ Khong (2004)

²⁸ Leifer (1996, 13)

²⁹ As Bull has written of the United States, "Is it the case that a state which finds itself in a position of preponderant power will always use it to "lay down the law to others"? Will a locally preponderant state always be a menace to the independence of its neighbors, and a generally preponderant state to the survival of the system of states? The proposition is implicitly denied by the leaders of powerful states, who see sufficient safeguard of the rights of others in their own virtue and good intentions. Franklin Roosevelt saw the safeguard of Latin America's rights in United States' adherence to the "good-neighbor policy" (1977, 110). Likewise, Ikenberry (2001) has written about post-war America's exercise in "strategic restraint."

³⁰ Monteiro (2011/2012)

³¹ Leifer (1996, 13)

³² The notion of an open security regionalism, as a riff of APEC open economic regionalism, is discussed in Acharya (1997). On APEC open regionalism, see Drysdale (1991) and Garnaut (1996).

³³ On the way ASEAN has contributed to and helped defined the terms and parameters of regional security discourse on East Asia, see, Ba (2009) and Tan (2013a).

³⁴ Keating (2012, 5)



³⁵Goh and Acharya (2002)

³⁶Emmers and Tan (2011, 50)

³⁷ Christensen (2011)

³⁸In the context of China's (and other countries') resistance to their ARF counterparts and attempts to facilitate ARF's realization of its vision for a preventive diplomacy agenda, see Emmers and Tan (2011).

³⁹The Suharto government's use of a "good neighbor policy" – essentially an exercise of strategic restraint – to persuade Malaysia and Singapore of its peaceful intentions in a post-Confrontation environment, the success of which would be critical to the establishment and continuation of ASEAN, is discussed in Tan (2013b).

⁴⁰Dittmar (2006, 116). More broadly, on the pros and cons of decision-making in consensus-based institutions such as the ARF, see Johnston (2003a).

⁴¹Ba (2006), Johnston (2003b)

⁴² See various essays in the collection by Dent (2008)

⁴³The politics behind the formation of the EAS are discussed in Emmers, Liow, and Tan (2011).

⁴⁴ EAFTA comprises the ten countries of the APT, whereas CEPEA targets the ten APT states plus Australia, India and New Zealand, essentially the complete membership of the East Asia Summit before its enlargement in 2011.

⁴⁵Wignaraja (2013), Hiebert and Hanlon (2012)

⁴⁶ For example, among the diplomatic cables released during the Wikileaks scandal in 2010, a U.S. State Department cable recounting a meeting in March 2009 between Prime Minister Rudd and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton suggested that Rudd held a hawkish view of China's rise, and proposed the use of his vision for an "Asia Pacific Community" to curb China's growing influence and prevent the emergence of a "Chinese Monroe Doctrine" (Maley 2010).

⁴⁷ Cited in Langdon and Job (1997, 3)

⁴⁸ Much as the problems of the Doha Round of trade talks have contributed to the regional shift toward the formation of preferential trade agreements, so too, it should be said, has regional disenchantment with APEC acted as a driving force (Lincoln 2001).

⁴⁹Nesadurai (2006)

⁵⁰ The Economist (2001)



⁵¹Kan (2010)

⁵²Stewart (2010, 32)

⁵³Sirila (2010)

⁵⁴As Hillary Clinton has argued regarding Asia Pacific regionalism, “It’s more important to have organizations that produce results, rather than simply producing new organizations.” (cited in Tan 2011).

⁵⁵Jones and Smith (2007)

⁵⁶Amador (2013)

⁵⁷Dyer and Dombey (2010)

⁵⁸ Wang (2012)

⁵⁹ Comment by Australian strategic thinker Hugh White, in Callick (2013).

⁶⁰Zoellick (2013)

⁶¹ As former U.S. Secretary Hillary Clinton noted in 2010, Asia’s regional institutions “must be effective and be focused on delivering results ... The formation and operation of regional groups should be motivated by concrete, pragmatic considerations. It’s more important to have organizations that produce results, rather than simply producing new organizations.” (Clinton 2010).

⁶²Leifer (1996), Khong (1997)

⁶³Sukma (2012)

⁶⁴ Parts of this discussion are drawn from Tan (2012)

⁶⁵ Bower (2011)

⁶⁶ See, paragraph 15 of Article 1 of the ASEAN Charter.

⁶⁷ In that regard, Cambodia’s recent actions – blocking an ASEAN joint declaration, “interfering” in Thailand’s domestic affairs by hosting fugitive former Thai leader Thaksin Shinawatra, and even appointing him in an advisory capacity in 2009 – are, as Amitav Acharya has observed, ironic given that Cambodia likely owes its very sovereignty to ASEAN’s role in seeking a negotiated solution to the third Indochina war (Acharya 2012).

⁶⁸ The conventional wisdom about Asian countries is that they prefer to hedge rather than balance or bandwagon (Goh 2006; Lee 2012; Medeiros 2005/2006)



⁶⁹ Rosenberg (2013)

⁷⁰ In January 2012, it established an agreement with Washington to expand their bilateral defense ties, which would involve rotational deployments of U.S. military assets to the Philippines for “training” purposes (Lum 2012). Hanoi has sought access to the U.S. market presumably as a way to diversify its dependence on China, with which it has a massive trade deficit (Thayer 2012). Hanoi has upgraded defense ties with Washington in an effort at a strategic realignment that, at least from the US standpoint, provides America strategic access and advantage to and in Southeast Asia (Symonds 2010). Both countries have conducted joint naval activities. Vietnam has opened Cam Ranh Bay facilities for commercial repair, which the U.S. Navy has already utilized for minor repairs of at least three of its ships from its Military Sealift Command (Weitz 2012). In June 2012, former U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta visited Cam Ranh and called for high-level exchanges and enhanced defense cooperation between their countries. For Hanoi, the allure of enhanced security ties with Washington also has to do with the prospective lifting of restrictions on the sale of U.S. weaponry and strategic materials to the Vietnamese military, and the impact this can have on Vietnam’s defense modernization (Jordan, Stern, and Lohman 2012).

⁷¹ Thayer (2012). Also, when prodded in a public conference on whether Vietnam was prepared to countenance potential “U.S. betrayal” if China opted to escalate tensions in the South China Sea to the point that America decided to back down, Nguyen Hung Son, the deputy director-general of the Institute for Strategic Studies of the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV) – the reputable think tank of the Vietnamese Foreign Affairs Ministry – retorted that Vietnam was well aware of the risks of unwarranted reliance on any external power and is acting on that understanding. Comments rendered at the 26th Asia-Pacific Roundtable, Kuala Lumpur, May 29–30, 2012.

⁷² Pramono (2010), Anwar (2013), Australian Network (2012)

⁷³ Lee, J. (2012), Reuters (2011), Weisgerber (2012)

⁷⁴ Notably, Cambodia presided over ASEAN’s adoption of the long-awaited ASEAN Human Rights Declaration and the Bali Concord III Plan of Action (2013–2017), which outlines a common platform for ASEAN in its external relations. With Cambodia as chair, ASEAN also officially launched the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation, it agreed to establish the ASEAN Regional Mine Action Centre in Cambodia, and it launched the RCEP. Finally, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and Brazil acceded to the TAC that same year (Sarith 2013). Also see Emmerson (2012).

⁷⁵ See the results of surveys of Asia’s elites in Gill, Green, Tsuji and Watts (2009).

⁷⁶ Dr. Surin Pitsuwan’s remarks on whether ASEAN can succeed in fulfilling its goal of becoming an economic community by its 2015 deadline, rendered in Singapore on June 1, 2011 (cited in Kassim 2011).

⁷⁷ MacLeod (2013)



⁷⁸ Holland and Pomfret (2013)

⁷⁹ Maley (2010)

⁸⁰ Woodroffe (2012)

⁸¹ Koh (2009)

⁸² Cossa (2012)

⁸³ Bower (2011)



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Author's Biography

See Seng Tan

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies
Nanyang Technological University

See Seng Tan is the deputy director of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, head of the Centre for Multilateralism Studies, and an associate professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. A student of Asian security, he is the author/editor of 9 books and has published over 40 scholarly papers and book chapters. His most recent book is *The Making of the Asia Pacific: Knowledge Brokers and the Politics of Representation* (Amsterdam University Press, 2013). He has held visiting appointments at the International Institute of Strategic Studies, Australian National University, Griffith University, and Ritsumeikan Asia-Pacific University, and has consulted for various regional organizations and national government ministries and agencies. Before joining academia, he worked at a faith-based, nonprofit organization. He received his B.A. (Honors) and M.A. degrees from the University of Manitoba, and his Ph.D. is from Arizona State University.

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