

The Rise of China and the Division of ASEAN

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Abstract

International relations theorists have long been envisioning the durability of ASEAN. ASEAN members have successfully formed a strong collective identity as the result of political and functional interactions and norms internalisation amongst its members through the 'ASEAN way'. This paper investigates the effectiveness of ASEAN's decision-making mechanism amidst the rise of China. It explores China's new assertiveness and its strategy to control the regional order in East Asia, in particular, over the South China Sea (SCS) territory. It further explores the SCS dispute by one ASEAN member – the Philippines – at the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA). This paper concludes that the outdated principles underpinning ASEAN's internal political practices and norms are ineffective in solving issues emerging as a result of the rise of China. China's strategy to 'divide and rule' ASEAN through coercion and inducement has undermined the ASEAN consensus principle by threatening the spirit of solidarity and regional unity of ASEAN members.

Keywords: The Rise of China, International Relations in Asia-Pacific, ASEAN Consensus Principle, South China Sea Dispute

Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has played a significant role in managing and negotiating order during both times of a crisis and stability in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific (Yates, 2017: 443). ASEAN is perceived as one of the most effective regional institutions outside of 'the West', or more specifically Western Europe (Beeson, 2016: 6). ASEAN members hold the principles that support cooperation, mutual respect among members, renunciation of the use of force, necessity of reaching consensus, and strict adherence to non-interference (Dosch, 2017 :160; Acharya 2015). However, the consensus-driven and conflict-avoidance principles underpinning ASEAN have received highly divergent views by scholars. On the one hand, scholars such as Amitav Acharya argue that ASEAN is an example of a regional organization whose members can exert influence over their more powerful peers by acting collectively in maintaining peace and security in Southeast Asia (Acharya, 2004: 248). On the other hand, scholars such as David Jones and Michael Smith (2007: 150) argue that ASEAN is an example of a mechanism for avoiding problems rather than resolving them. The 'ASEAN way' in resolving issues based on the consensus of its members is arguably facing the most formidable challenge amid the rise of China. ASEAN members have been divided about how to respond to China's assertive influence in the region, especially over the South China Sea (SCS) dispute. For all these reasons, this paper is of high significance.

This paper argues that the outdated principles underpinning ASEAN's internal political practices and norms are ineffective in solving issues emerging as a result of the rise of China. China's strategy to 'divide and rule' has successfully pulled ASEAN's members in different directions resulting in difficulty in maintaining a sense of unity or collective purpose. This paper is divided into three sections. The first section discusses ASEAN's background and how decisions are made despite the diversity of its members. This section also examines how international relations

theorists, particularly realists and constructivists conceive the ASEAN policy-making process. The second section critically evaluates China's new assertiveness from the Chinese policy makers, analysts, and scholars' points of view. It further evaluates China's strategy to divide and rule ASEAN through coercion and inducement. The third section critically analyses the most disputed issue between ASEAN members and China – the South China Sea dispute. This section analyses the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA)'s verdict which has favoured the Philippines over China. It then assesses China's response which has challenged the relevance of ASEAN.

ASEAN's Historical Contexts and Its Internal Problems

The establishment of ASEAN and the 'ASEAN way'

ASEAN was established in 1967 as a product of the Cold War which had just entered a new level as a result of the Vietnam War (Dosch, 2018: 160). According to Dosch, the founding fathers of ASEAN envisioned an intensified regional co-operation as a means to strengthen Asia's position in the Asia-Pacific region to reduce the risk of becoming a victim of great power rivalry. The association successfully institutionalized a network of regular meetings among its members which allows the governments of Southeast Asian states to discuss the problems or challenges facing the region (Sopiee, 1991: 320). One of the most distinguished features of ASEAN is the ability of the members to harmonize the foreign policies and often to deliver one voice in international affairs (Freistein 2013: 419). This has allowed ASEAN to actively participate in the rising debate on multilateral institution-building by initiating a regional dialogue scheme with leading regional and global

powers such as Japan, China, the United States and the European Union under the framework of annual series and for a such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) (Yates, 2017: 444).

ASEAN has prided itself on the 'ASEAN Way' which is understood as an informal and non-legalistic way for the ASEAN states to overcome their internal disputes and develop a common approach to solve external challenges through 'consultation' and 'consensus' (Acharya, 1998: 80). This approach has been important in avoiding conflict and war among the diverse ASEAN members through the process of interactions and socialization within the association (Acharya, 1998: 55). However, the ASEAN way's approach and non-interference principle have also posed a challenge to effective co-operation. Beeson (2016: 10) argues that the emphasis on consensus and voluntarism has avoided the difficult problems rather than confronting them. He further noticed that ASEAN appears to be unable to influence the behavior of its own members. The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) which provides a code of conduct to shape the members' behaviours relies on whether the individual state takes the norms or precepts seriously or not. For example, a provision under TAC states that 'ASEAN High Council would resolve intramural disputes. Article 14 of Treaty of Amity and Cooperation points out that 'to settle disputes through regional processes, the High Contracting Parties shall constitute, as a continuing body, a High Council comprising a Representative at ministerial level from each of the High Contracting Parties to take cognizance of the existence of disputes or situations likely to disturb regional peace and harmony.'

However, the High Council has not been convened ever and each member has a veto to reject the Council's action. This has shown that without the strong commitment of its members, ASEAN will find it difficult to reach consensus in every forum (Acharya and Johnston, 2007: 32).

International relations theories: the durability of ASEAN

International relations theorists have long been predicting the durability of ASEAN, especially constructivists and realists. Constructivists argue that the nature of ASEAN regional order is determined by the norms and identity, the individual states' agency role and the potential transformation through socialization and institution building (Acharya and Stubbs, 2006: 125). According to the constructivist perspective, regional identity and norm play a crucial part in the process of community building, going beyond the realist view which perceives that material capabilities such as military forces and great power alliances are the most crucial determinants of regional stability (Acharya and Stubbs, 2006: 127). ASEAN members have successfully formed a strong collective identity as the result of political and functional interactions and norms internalization (Acharya, 2001: 2). Thus, the association's durability largely depends on the embodiment of a collective Southeast Asian identity amongst its members through the 'ASEAN way'.

However, realists argue that the ASEAN way is perceived as ineffectual resulting in ASEAN being seen as a 'talk shop' (Dorsh, 2018: 176). Narine (2006: 200) has observed that ASEAN's collective identity is insufficient to sustain its durability. The nature of ASEAN is now different to when it was established and the distinction between regional and universal norms has become vaguer. In a globalized era, the increase of interaction between ASEAN members that require high-level diplomacy with the US or the EU has made the norms less Asian-centric and more universal (Narine, 2006: 204). Similarly, Kawasaki (2006: 221) points out that the constructivist approach in the 'ASEAN way' is considered as romantic and intellectually naïve. He further argues that even the ARF which attempts to institutionalize the 'ASEAN way' into the regional code

of conduct is still seen as serving the member state's individual interests. This indicates that the ongoing convergence of regional and universal norms and the domination of the individual state's interests would ultimately challenge the ASEAN's durability in the near future.

The Rise of China

Apart from prevalent ASEAN internal problems, the most challenging external issue that ASEAN is now confronting is the detrimental effect caused by the rise of China. This section evaluates China's international influence amid the significant material rise of China from the perspective of Chinese scholars, analysts, and policymakers. It then examines China's dual strategy: coercion and inducement which have threatened the unity of ASEAN members.

China's new assertiveness

The rise of China has arguably been linked to China's new assertiveness and its strategy to control the regional order in East Asia. According to Johnston (2013: 47), the China's assertiveness argument published by the international scholars and media did not represent the real Chinese diplomatic strategy. Johnston further argues that under the Hu Jintao administration, the policy discourse of 'harmonious society' (hexie shehui) and foreign policy of 'harmonious world' (hexie shijie) were introduced claiming that China's national and international strategy is harmonious rather than coercive or assertive. However, since Xi Jinping's rise to power, many scholars argue that China has adopted a more aggressive approach to influencing the regional order by gaining more influence in diplomatic affairs and control over territories, particularly in the South China Sea (Glosny, 2016: 25).

According to Glosny (2016: 3), Chinese scholars, analysts, and leaders conceive that there is a significant gap between China's rising

power in comparison to its international influence. Chinese experts are disappointed at the limited influence that China possesses in the region despite its significant material capabilities, its asymmetric economic interdependence and its close geographical proximity to other states in the region. They also emphasize that other countries should have a 'rethinking' (fanshi) mentality towards China and adjust their conformity in shaping the regional order (Glosny, 2016: 7). The 'rethinking' and 'adjustment' of China should change other countries' perception not to be threatened by China's rise and therefore adopt a more cooperative and welcoming approach to China's policy. Likewise, Chinese analysts state that China's economic dominance in Asia has increased its role as an 'irreplaceable market' for its neighbours. China has surpassed Japan and the US as the largest trading partner with most countries in Asia. Thus, with this immense economic influence in the region, Chinese experts affirm that it is 'natural' for China to expect accommodation and support from weaker Asian countries (Glosny, 2016: 8).

For example, in 2010, after multiple ASEAN countries joined the US in raising the South China Sea dispute during the ARF meeting in Hanoi, Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi strongly stated that 'China is a big country and other countries are small countries and that is just a fact' (She left the meeting room for an hour, and then she returned to deliver this statement and accused the US of plotting against China over the South China Sea dispute) (Pomfret: 2010). Since ASEAN countries used to manage this maritime dispute in the SCS involving China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei and Malaysia through co-operation, the Chinese expected that these countries would not challenge the rise of China over this issue and instead accommodate China's interests (Glosny, 2016: 9). The Chinese interlocutors further stated that they did not expect a

resolution of this dispute, instead, they expected the weak rival claimants would not make the situation worse by challenging China's sovereignty or internationalizing this issue in multilateral fora.

China's dual strategy: coercion and inducement

Although ASEAN has its internal problem due to the intrinsic differences within the group, the rise of China has posed another level of challenge in the development and longevity of ASEAN. In order to influence ASEAN countries, China has been actively engaging interactions with individual ASEAN members that could impact regional multilateral affairs. Le Thu (2018: 1) asserts that China has conducted a dual strategy of coercion and inducement with ASEAN members individually resulting in the ineffectiveness of the ASEAN consensus principle. This tactic is often called 'divide and rule'.

According to Schelling (1970:3), coercion is defined as a psychological phenomenon used to achieve desired objectives by the coercive party by leveraging that actor's advantageous position over others. The coercion can also occur in the absence of a physical presence once the psychological threat is already planted. For example, in ASEAN meetings, the state leaders are likely to opt for avoiding collective actions about certain topics which may be hostile to China's interests (Le Thu, 2018: 4). In the 50th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in Manila, the leaders from ASEAN countries refused to mention the militarization of artificial islands built by China although it has impacted on regional tension (ASEAN, 2017). The dissuasion strategy has shown a Chinese coercive effort in preventing ASEAN countries from discussing the SCS dispute in multilateral meetings.

On the other hand, the inducement is understood as actions providing incentives for the desired behaviour or psychological imagination (Le Thu, 2018: 3). China's economic capabilities in the region have translated into its strategy. Lee (2015: 7) argues that the highest priority of

the Southeast Asian countries is economic growth and prosperity. The Chinese-led initiatives have outshined the ASEAN-led initiatives, for instance, the ASEAN Economic Community (EAC), which implies that China has a role as the region's 'provider'. Beijing's economic projects are believed to be the most efficient inducement in levying discipline. For example, the Philippines and Vietnam have been left out of the 2+7 Initiative. This project is likely to challenge the political cooperation and security of ASEAN in the future (Le Thu, 2018: 11). This exclusion is understood as Beijing's way to express its disappointment over the maritime disputes with both countries.

Furthermore, the One Road One Belt (OBOR) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) initiatives have marked Beijing's serious economic 'offensive' in the region (Summers, 2015). Under the OBOR program, new infrastructure such as high-speed railways, seaports, pipelines and motorways are being built across the Asian region to amplify Beijing's notion of shared interests (Zhao, 2015). This economic initiative is appealing to smaller and developing countries in the region because they attempt to fulfil the need for infrastructure. Even the conflicting countries like the Philippines and Vietnam are enthusiastic to be involved in these economic and development projects. However, their participation will be compromised carefully by China by requiring that they relinquish their sovereign maritime claims (Le Thu, 2018: 12). The coercion and inducement strategies have shown that China, to some extent, has gained control over the regional order.

The South China Sea Dispute

The rise of China has persuaded it to become more assertive in gaining influence and control over territories. China has threatened the

unity of ASEAN over the South China Sea (SCS) dispute with ASEAN members. This section critically analyses the SCS dispute, particularly in case of the Philippines against China post the PCA ruling which has favoured the Philippines. This section further examines ASEAN members' reactions towards the ruling and the Philippines' reliance on the association.

Background of SCS Dispute

After the Mischief Reef incident in 1995, China adopted a domestic law in 1998 which contains China's exclusive economic zone and continental shelf and a provision asserting "historic rights" in the SCS (Morada, 2019: 270). The SCS dispute had prompted ASEAN to issue a legally binding Code of Conduct (COC) in 2002 requiring China and other claimants to comply with the COC. In 2009, China filed a map in the United Nations with the so-called 'nine-dash-line' as its endeavour to claim a territorial area in the SCS. However, China's assertiveness was increased after the former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's declaration in July 2010 during the ASEAN post-ministerial ARF meeting in Hanoi stating that 'freedom of navigation in the SCS is in the "national interest" of the United States' (Clinton 2011). This has caused China to become more aggressive in exercising its military power in the SCS, particularly in the area called Scarborough Shoal which had become the centre of the maritime dispute between Beijing and Manila from 2012 (Morada, 2019: 271).

The deadlock over Scarborough Shoal between the Philippines and China has impacted the ASEAN members' position. During the ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting in Phnom Penh in July 2012, the Philippines demanded to include the Scarborough Shoal situation at the conclusion of the meeting. However, Cambodia (as chair of ASEAN at that time) declined the Philippines' request. It could be argued that Cambodia did this because of its high dependency on China as its major investor and aid

provider. Although the Philippines was supported by other ASEAN members, Cambodia insisted in its position resulting in the absence of a communiqué or Chairman's statement for the first time since ASEAN was established in 1967 (Bower, 2012). Cambodia's action has shown that China has successfully disrupted the ASEAN consensus reflecting the ineffectiveness of ASEAN.

After the 2012 event, the Philippines decided to file a SCS dispute against China before the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in January 2013. On 14 July 2016, the PCA verdict decided in a favour of the Philippines confirming that China's claim of historic rights has no legal foundation (PCA, 2016). Furthermore, the tribunal also decides that China's activities such as illegal fishing and environmentally ruinous artificial island construction within the Philippines' two hundred nautical miles EEZ have violated the Philippines' sovereign rights. However, President Xi Jinping affirmed that the court's ruling would not impact China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights (Phillips et al, 2016).

ASEAN's institutional crisis

Instead of celebrating a fellow ASEAN member's judicial victory or by expressing the relief in having legal clarity after decades of dispute, other ASEAN members did not seem to show any spirit of solidarity or regional unity (Thu, 2018: 7). For instance, Cambodia once again rejected an ASEAN statement over the PCA ruling at the leaders' meeting (ASEAN 2016). Cambodia retracted a communiqué that expresses the ASEAN's concerns about the rising tension between the Philippines and China. This internal disunity has illustrated ASEAN's deepening institutional crisis creating the perception that China's 'divide and rule' tactics were executed successfully.

The absence of a coherent reaction by ASEAN members to the PCA's ruling has led the media and observers to become sceptical of ASEAN's survival and relevance (Drysdale et al, 2016). China has undermined ASEAN's decision-making process by spreading mutual distrust among members proving that an 'institutionalized hedging' strategy is ineffective against a more powerful state (Ruland, 2011 85). China only needs to induce or influence one member of the association to obstruct the whole ASEAN decision-making mechanism. Thus, the consensus-driven principle has eroded ASEAN's intramural trust and affected its institutional confidence.

Noticing a deepening institutional crisis in ASEAN, Morada (2019: 266) asserts that the Philippines should embark on developing self-help or self-reliance capability as part of an internal balancing strategy to protect the state's national interests in the SCS. According to Dunne and Smith (2005: 164), self-help is a fundamental principle of action in the anarchical system where a state has responsibility for its own survival or security. This is based on the realist perspective which conceives that a state should not rely on other states or institutions when it comes to its own security. While a powerful state such as China can strengthen its military or defence system if it feels threatened by other states, a small state such as the Philippines should resort to balance of power strategies by establishing economic and defence capacity or aligning with a more powerful state or forming alliances with other states (Morada, 2019: 266).

According to Morada (2019: 278), since the US commitment to defend its weak ally (the Philippines) amid the rising tension in SCS is questionable, the Philippines should pay more serious attention to building its self-help or self-reliance capabilities by mobilizing and allocating more resources to building a modern coast guard or improving naval defence capabilities to affirm legitimate claims over the disputed area in the SCS. Furthermore, the Philippines should develop defence technologies through research and development or relying on technology transfer from South

Korea which already has a shipbuilding facility in Subic—a former US naval base (Morada, 2019: 278). Morada further asserts that alliance or multilateral diplomacy should only be a complement, not a substitute when it comes to dealing with territorial threats. This has demonstrated that the centrality of ASEAN in managing regional security by relying on socializing and norm internalizing is proven ineffective in the SCS case. Furthermore, the fact that a member of ASEAN would develop self-help or self-reliance shows that the association is unable to perform its function to protect its members when a threat comes from a major power in the region.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that the outdated principles underpinning ASEAN's internal political practices and norms are ineffective in solving issues emerging as a result of the rise of China. The emphasis on consensus and voluntarism has avoided the difficult problems rather than confronting them. This indicates that without the strong commitment of its members, ASEAN will find it difficult to reach consensus in every forum. Since Xi Jinping's rise to power, many scholars argue that China has adopted a more aggressive approach to influencing the regional order by gaining more influence in diplomatic affairs and control over territories, particularly in the South China Sea. In order to influence ASEAN countries, China has been actively engaging interactions with individual ASEAN members that could impact regional multilateral affairs. China has conducted a dual strategy of coercion and inducement with ASEAN members individually resulting in the ineffectiveness of the ASEAN consensus principle and also have shown that China, to some extent, has gained control over the regional order. Thus, China's strategy to 'divide

and rule' has successfully pulled ASEAN's members in different directions resulting in difficulty in maintaining a sense of unity or collective purpose.

The rise of China has persuaded it to become more assertive in gaining influence and control over territories. China has threatened the unity of ASEAN over the South China Sea (SCS) dispute with ASEAN members, particularly in case of the Philippines against China which was challenged at the PCA. Post the PCA ruling, ASEAN members did not seem to show any spirit of solidarity or regional unity, for instance, Cambodia rejected an ASEAN statement over the PCA ruling at the leaders' meeting. If the Philippines would develop self-help or self-reliance capability, this shows that ASEAN is unable to perform its function to protect its members when a threat comes from a major power in the region. ***

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