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ASEAN and Strategic Rivalry among the Great Powers in Asia

Fenna Egberink and Frans-Paul van der Putten

Abstract: This paper looks at ASEAN's role in the context of the three main bilateral relations among the great powers in Asia: China-US, China-Japan, and China-India. The authors argue that although ASEAN's influence is limited in terms of geographical reach and its impact on actual security issues, Southeast Asia is potentially an important object of great power rivalry and thus the sub-region is highly relevant to Asian geopolitics. The key question with regard to geopolitical stability is how ASEAN will deal with increased great power rivalries in its own sub-region.

Keywords: ASEAN, China, United States of America, Japan, India, great powers, geopolitics, stability

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Introduction

There seems to be a consensus among observers that during the past two decades, the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN) has contributed to stable relations between the great powers in Asia.¹ It is thought to have mainly done so by establishing new channels and platforms for communication.² Although the two ASEAN-led multilateral initiatives that have been most relevant for security outside Southeast Asia itself – the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Plus Three (APT; ASEAN plus Japan, China, and South Korea) – are unable to actually manage regional security issues, they have facilitated and broadened diplomatic interaction. If it is true that ASEAN has indeed been a stabilising influence in the Asian region, this raises the question of whether it can continue this role in the future.³

Given its limited political and economic leverage vis-à-vis the great powers, ASEAN's regional position relies primarily on bilateral support from its regional partners. Furthermore, it is highly dependent on regional dynamics, i.e., the degree of cordiality – or the lack thereof – between the great powers. Should relations among the major powers deteriorate then ASEAN would end up in an uncomfortable position wedged between antagonistic great powers. It could then be forced to choose sides, or become the battlefield for proxy wars (Ba 2003: 645; Limaye 2007; Simon 2008; Cheng 2001). On the other hand, should these relations improve significantly then ASEAN could become sidelined altogether in international relations. If the external position of the Southeast Asian countries is highly dependent on the great powers and the state of their interaction,⁴ a number of questions becomes relevant: what is ASEAN's position vis-à-vis the primary bilateral relationships among the major powers, and can it influence these? Does its role as the provider of meaningful multilateral platforms exist purely by the grace of the needs of its more powerful counterparts, or does ASEAN also have certain inherent assets through which it can contrib-

1 As discussed at the Clingendael Expert Meeting on 18 June 2010.

2 See for instance the paper by Alica D. Ba in the current issue, 'Regional Security in East Asia: ASEAN's Value Added and Limitations'.

3 This paper is based on a study by Clingendael on ASEAN and Geopolitical Stability in Asia. The Clingendael Expert Meeting on 'ASEAN's Potential as a Stabilizing Factor in Great Power Relations in Asia', The Hague, 18 June 2010, where the preceding papers in the current issue were presented, was organized in the course of the same study.

4 See the paper by Lee Jones in the current issue: 'Still in the "Drivers' Seat", But for How Long? ASEAN's Capacity for Leadership in East-Asian International Relations'.

ute to more stable great power relations? Which particular bilateral relationship between the great powers is it most likely to have an influence on, and on which of the security issues that currently exist between those powers?⁵

The term ‘ASEAN’ is used here to refer to both the organization and to its member states – who constitute a grouping, at the very minimum, in the sense that they are located in the same geographical region and that they are members of ASEAN. For the purpose of this paper, the leading actors in Asian geopolitics are taken to be China, Japan, India, and the United States of America (from here on referred to as US). As indicated in the introduction to this section, the primary geopolitical relationships in Asia are those between a) China and the US, b) China and Japan, and c) China and India.

1 ASEAN and China

China’s rise is at the basis of the major shifts that currently take place in Asian geopolitics, and for ASEAN its relations with its China neighbour are of crucial importance. ASEAN and China in fact have developed strong ties over the course of the 1990s. Since then China has remained a strong supporter of ASEAN’s central position in regional organizations, and the two sides have developed an extensive framework for bilateral cooperation. While ASEAN is eager to engage China and is highly dependent on China’s willingness to support its multilateral initiatives, at the same time it fears becoming overwhelmed by China’s rise to global power. The simmering dispute about the South China Sea has recently intensified, with China seemingly more assertive about its territorial claims than before. So far the basic approach of the Southeast Asian countries to dealing with China’s rise has remained the same as it has been since the end of the Cold War: to strengthen ties with China while at the same time encouraging other major powers to become or remain engaged in Southeast Asia, which is hoped to counterbalance Chinese influence.

2 ASEAN and Sino-US Relations

China’s influence in Southeast Asia has been growing at the expense of American influence in the region. Beijing’s charm offensive in recent years was partly triggered by the – temporarily – increased American interest in

5 For the main security issues that are relevant see the introduction to this special section by Fenna Egberink and Frans-Paul van der Putten: ‘Introduction: What Is ASEAN’s Relevance for Geopolitical Stability in Asia?’.

the region after 9/11, as well as a sense of opportunism when recognizing the increasing divergence in values between the US and Southeast Asian states, and the limited enthusiasm of the US for ASEAN's multilateral endeavours (Cheng 2001: 446; Ba 2003; Acharya and Tan 2006; Lee 2007). China subsequently tried to solidify its influence in Southeast Asia and promote an exclusive form of Asian regionalism. John Lee has indeed concluded that '[a] combination of US neglect and Chinese imagination is nudging states in the region toward China' (Lee 2007: 46). Recent moves of the US to claim a role in the South China Sea conflict,⁶ and Washington's opting for membership of the East Asia Summit (EAS) could in turn be interpreted as a response aimed at preventing Chinese hegemony in the region.

The ASEAN countries themselves have much depending on fostering good relations *with* both these major powers, but also on good relations *between* the US and China. ASEAN serves as the stage for a game for influence in the region. Southeast Asia's particular geographical position, the long-standing involvement of both US and China in the sub-region, and ASEAN's central role in regional initiatives have worked as pull-factors to attract the US and China in contending for influence. But although in this sense ASEAN plays a part in 'the most important strategic relationship in East Asia' (Soeya 2010), it does not play an active role, in the sense that it has the ability to influence their bilateral relationship.

ASEAN is unable to use its preferred instrument for its external policy: multilateralism. Sino-American relations are strongly based on bilateral exchanges that take place outside a multilateral context. In addition, the main Asian security issue in China-US relations, the Taiwan issue, is located in East rather than Southeast Asia. However, currently the South China Sea seems to be emerging as a new 'hot spot' in Sino-US security relations. In addition, that the US announced its ambition to play a role in the South China Sea dispute in the ARF, that the long-postponed inaugural ASEAN-US Summit has finally taken place, and that the US is looking to join the East Asia Summit, do show that the United States is using regional multilateral institutions as a tool to (re-)gain influence in Asia. Because of its central position – both in a literal and figurative sense – ASEAN cannot simply be discarded as irrelevant to US-China security relations.

6 At the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Hanoi during July 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that the United States has an interest in the way the South China Sea dispute evolves, that it should be solved in accordance with the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea, and that it is prepared to facilitate initiatives towards its solution: press statement by Secretary Clinton, available through <www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/07/145095.htm> (11 September 2010).

3 ASEAN and Sino-Japanese Relations

As in the case of the US and China, there exists significant regional rivalry between Japan and China. In addition to economic competition, Sino-Japanese rivalry also involves their respective bids for a leadership role in regional cooperation as well as standing head to head in a territorial dispute in the East China Sea. A complicating factor for Japan is that its continuing dedication to its security alliance with the US (Munakata 2006; Yoshimatsu 2005; Aslam 2009; Ganesan 2000; Ba 2003) presents an obstacle to its integration in Asia. In the 1990s strains in Sino-Japanese relations ASEAN offered the opportunity to drive the process of regional cooperation (Yeo 2006). By winning both China's and Japan's support for its regional endeavours, ASEAN subsequently had the opportunity to give informal advice on how to improve bilateral relations, as well provide a neutral venue for these first exchanges through the ARF, Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM), and APT (Cheng 1999). Starting in 1999, Japan and China began holding trilateral meetings, with South Korea, in the sidelines of APT meetings. In 2008, these meetings even took place outside the APT framework altogether (Kuik 2005; Yuzawa 2005; Yoshimatsu 2005; Katori 2009).

Although – as a facilitator of communication between the two countries – ASEAN may well have made a positive contribution to Japan-China interaction, there are no signs that initiatives from ASEAN actually affected the main security issues that exist between these two countries, such as the territorial dispute in the East China Sea or the military build-up on both sides. There has been no ASEAN initiative aimed directly at either of these issues. Moreover, there are no indications that the relevant policies of either country are significantly influenced by considerations related to ASEAN. The main contributions by ASEAN so far, then, seem to be (1) facilitating closer interaction between China and Japan at the general level, and (2) acting as an 'audience' for the regional security policies of these two powers.⁷ As such, ASEAN has a certain, limited, potential to legitimize or de-legitimize Japanese and Chinese security policies towards each other. In other words, ASEAN has been an extra reason for Japan and China to refrain from aggressive behaviour.

A further question is how ASEAN's relevance to Sino-Japanese relations will develop in the future. The standoff between China and Japan regarding which way regional cooperation should go is not only preventing regional cooperation to go forward, it is also affecting ASEAN's ability to take a neutral position between the two. ASEAN's preferred way of shaping

7 The authors are grateful to Evelyn Goh for pointing out the second aspect.

regional cooperation is much closer to China's (although China does tend to restrict the institutions' agenda) and its desire to maintain its central position so great, that it now finds itself in a position where it is not impartial to the different proposals for regional frameworks that have been floated. In addition to the effective loss of its neutrality, the trilateral meetings between its 'Plus Three' partners may indicate ASEAN's role as mediator between Japan and China is over. This effect is further strengthened by reality that China and Japan engage on Northeast Asian security issues partly through channels related to the Six Party Talks,⁸ in which ASEAN is not involved.

In spite of this, ASEAN is still an important part of the *diplomatic* game between China and Japan. Because of ASEAN's good relations with China, it is in Japan's interest to maintain good relations with the grouping and in fact strengthen ASEAN as organization, in case its relations with China would deteriorate once more (Yeo 2006). Also, ASEAN is still the motor behind the regional integration process in which Japan wishes to be actively involved. Especially now that its economic leadership is being challenged by China, staying on good terms with ASEAN is ever more important. ASEAN thus has a – very limited – degree of leverage over the China-Japan relationship because it has several pull-factors working to its advantage.

4 ASEAN and Sino-Indian Relations

India's economic growth, the size of its population and its growing interest in playing a role in international affairs precipitate a potentially major role in the region. As an Asian actor however, India has not yet been asserting its weight. India is trailing behind China's economic development and China's ability to use its economic assets to gain political influence (Gordon 2010). Still, it is possible that the Sino-Indian relationship develops into the 'key element of the incipient balance of power system in Asia'. So far this relationship has been marred by several serious security disagreements (Mohan 2008).

Since the start of India's 'Look East' policy in 1991, ASEAN and India have started to develop their relationship, mainly by strengthening their economic ties (Long 2010; Gordon 2010). Given India's current rate of economic growth there is much scope for further economic cooperation, and at the end of last year ASEAN and India signed a Free Trade Agreement. There would be a great potential advantage for ASEAN if India

8 The Six Party Talks are a multilateral platform to address the North Korean nuclear issue, in which China, Japan, the US, North Korea, South Korea, and Russia participate.

became involved in Southeast Asia and ASEAN's multilateral initiatives to a greater extent than it is now (ASEAN Secretariat 2009; Mohan 2008).

Geographically, Southeast Asia occupies a central position in between the two great powers. India's strategic interest in the Indian Ocean is comparable to that of China in the South China Sea and its military expansion over the previous years is partly a response to that of China. Southeast Asia is the entry point for Chinese shipping into the Indian Ocean, and Indian shipping into the Western Pacific. In this regard, and given the increasing degree of maritime rivalry between India and China, Southeast Asia is potentially one of the regional focus points of strategic considerations of the two great powers towards each other. India has in recent years signed defence cooperation agreements with several ASEAN countries, and has become increasingly interested in security multilateralism. Because of ASEAN's centrality in regional institution-building, ASEAN is in a position to partly shape India's role in future regional efforts (Faisol Keling, Shuib and Ajis 2009; Tai 2008).

Still, it remains to be seen which role ASEAN can play in Sino-Indian security relations. Even if India would become embedded and more proactive in the region's multilateral frameworks, these would still not be able to deal with such problems as territorial disputes between China and India or the two countries' military expansion. And again, like in the case of the Sino-American relationship, security communication takes place almost exclusively on bilateral terms. For the foreseeable future, it seems that ASEAN's role will remain limited and related mainly to potential Sino-Indian maritime rivalry in and around Southeast Asia itself.

5 Conclusion

In order to strengthen stability in the broader region – and at the same time guarantee the continued relevance of ASEAN – the Southeast Asians have created several frameworks for regional cooperation, thereby serving as 'catalyst of Asian regionalism' (Joseph Camilleri cited in Yeo 2006). By getting countries around the table and promoting the use of diplomacy as opposed to force, ASEAN has contributed to more stable regional dynamics, especially in the case of the Sino-Japanese relationship (Tai 2008; Narine 2008: 412). However, the prospects for a more active stabilising role are limited. ASEAN has made some achievements by using its 'weakness as strength' (Rössler 2009), but its position in the region will remain heavily dependent on external factors over which it has no influence. ASEAN's room to act will continue to be limited by the great degree of inequality in terms of power between ASEAN and the major actors, as well as by the fact

that ASEAN is unable to address most of the main security concerns that exist among the major powers.

From the three main geopolitical relationships, it is the one between China and Japan that is most likely to benefit from ASEAN's stabilising role. Both the US-China and the India-China relationships develop mainly outside the scope of ASEAN-led initiatives such as the ARF and the APT. To an important degree this is also true for Japan-China relations, but for China as well as Japan the ASEAN initiatives are an important addition to regular bilateral exchanges. In addition, part of Sino-Japanese competition focuses precisely on their respective positions in the regional integration process.

It seems unlikely that ASEAN can contribute to the stabilisation of specific security issues outside of Southeast Asia. Neither China nor the other three main powers are interested in involving third actors in the various territorial and military matters that cause tensions between them. This applies even in the case of Sino-Japanese relations. The only exception is the South China Sea controversy, because it relates to the maritime boundary between Southeast and East Asia. In this issue, various Southeast Asian countries are themselves involved, as are China, the US, and – indirectly – Japan. It is therefore a problem that exists both between several great powers, and between China and some of the Southeast Asian countries.

This dual nature of the issue carries two implications. One is that the Southeast Asians themselves run a risk of becoming entangled in great power rivalry, by becoming proxies for major powers that wish to avert Chinese domination of the South China Sea (Egberink 2010). The other implication is that even if no Southeast Asian country would have territorial claims in the South China Sea, ASEAN would still be directly involved simply because of the geography. Having unrestricted access to the South China Sea is of vital importance to all major powers in East Asia, and as a result Beijing's claim that most of this sea is a part of China creates frictions with the US and Japan, and increasingly also with India. Consequently, although the current territorial dispute is in itself already a serious security problem, the more fundamental issue is to what extent Southeast Asia itself will be contested between the leading powers.

This points at what ASEAN's most important 'asset' is when it comes to influencing geopolitical stability in the coming years, namely the desire of the great powers to have economic and logistical access to Southeast Asia, and to prevent rivals from gaining too much of an advantage in these regards. In other words, Southeast Asia is increasingly a potential theatre for geopolitical rivalry. In addition to this, ASEAN has a certain legitimizing capacity that is also important. The major powers have an interest in legitimizing their regional policies by being seen to adhere to norms that are

promoted by ASEAN. This is partly the result of the appeal of these norms themselves – certainly for Asian countries since these values are being promoted as expressing ‘Asian values’ – and of the multilateral space that ASEAN has created. But to a perhaps greater extent, this is the result of the strategic interest of the great powers to have influence in Southeast Asia. As geopolitical rivalry between China on the one hand and Japan, India, and the United States on the other hand is increasing, their focus will be more than ever on Southeast Asia, since this is where many of their interests come head to head.

ASEAN’s major geopolitical contribution in the past two decades has been its leadership in establishing new platforms and channels for communication. However, the room for ever more multilateral mechanisms is arguably finite, and it is not likely that further ASEAN initiatives in this sphere will have the same impact on great power stability that they had in the past. In the future the most important contribution that the Southeast Asian countries can make to stability in Asia, apart from working on stability domestically and within their own sub-region, is by finding ways to deal with China’s rise without encouraging new frictions between China and other great powers. In this context, the South China Sea dispute is probably the most visible security issue involving the great powers that takes place in Southeast Asia, but it will not necessarily remain the only one.

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