East Asian Developments and Contrasting Views among ASEAN Member Nations over East Asian Regionalism

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Certain developments are emerging in East Asia that could accentuate the divisions among ASEAN members over East Asian regionalism. One is the trend toward financial and trade cooperation between ASEAN and Northeast Asian countries that will make it difficult for ASEAN to resist East Asian regionalism. Another is the growing global economic importance of East Asia that can reduce ASEAN’s centrality in this regionalism. These divisions are most pronounced between Malaysia and Indonesia. While Malaysia wants the regional grouping to be a community, Indonesia sees it as basically functional in purpose. Malaysia, unlike Indonesia, sees some economic, especially financial, benefit from the regional grouping. China is not seen by Malaysia as a threat to the region and can best be accommodated in Malaysia’s preferred grouping, the ASEAN Plus Three, while Indonesia favors the East Asia Summit where India can help balance China.

Introduction

East Asian regionalism has had a contradictory effect on ASEAN unity. On one hand it has forced ASEAN to confront the challenges of this regionalism by enhancing its cohesion that will enable it to better face the more politically and economically powerful Northeast Asian “Plus Three” members. For example this can be seen in the proposal at the ASEAN Bali Summit of 2003 where the ASEAN heads were faced with the prospect of the pressure of East Asian regionalism, as well as other challenges, to create a more cohesive ASEAN Community from the existing ASEAN structure by the year 2020, subsequently moved forward to 2015. In addition, to further promote unity, ASEAN was to be given a legal personality in the form of an ASEAN Charter that has since been implemented.

The trend toward further integration of an East Asian community has increasingly brought to the fore divisions among the ASEAN members as to what an East Asian community should be. Such divisions were foreshadowed in the East Asian Economic Grouping (EAEG) that then prime minister Mahathir Mohamad first proposed in 1990. The divisions at that time revolved around many issues. They chiefly involved the criteria for membership, and the maintenance of ASEAN identity and unity in a wider grouping that included big powers. On the issue of membership, Mahathir’s proposal excluded the nations with dominant Caucasian populations, such as the
United States, Australia and New Zealand. However, some ASEAN members did not agree to such exclusion. Moreover, some were concerned that ASEAN identity and unity could be eroded by big-power domination in the grouping.

These divisions were overcome by Mahathir agreeing to amend his proposal to that of a caucus such as an East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC). This caucus did not suggest any great integration and attenuated the original proposal. Secondly, not many of the ASEAN members were convinced of the need or the urgency for such a grouping at that time and despite Mahathir’s subsequent attempt to push his East Asian Economic Community concept these ASEAN members were able to relegate the EAEC to the margins of the discourses of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Thirdly, the fortuitous development of the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) regional grouping enabled the ASEAN countries to discover a formula that could ensure their unity and prevent big-power domination. The APT, the genesis of which came when the Asian members met informally in 1995 to coordinate their positions for the first Asia-Europe Meeting in 1996 and which subsequently became an annual affair after 1997, allowed ASEAN to take a central role that permitted it to alleviate any adverse impact of such a community on ASEAN unity.\(^1\) ASEAN could take this leadership role because the two big powers in the APT, China and Japan, could not trust each other to assume the leadership.\(^2\)

Two decades after Mahathir’s original proposal, these divisions have become more difficult to put aside because of the increasing trend toward ASEAN economic dependence on Northeast Asia and the changing role of East Asia in the world. This increasing dependence has made it difficult for ASEAN to easily ignore calls for an East Asian community that involves ASEAN while the second is likely to lead to a grouping that could marginalize ASEAN. In addition, the focus on big power domination has changed. Two decades ago, Japan and the United States were considered by ASEAN as the big powers in East Asia likely to dominate. It is now China, given the decline of Japan and because the United States has not played a role in East Asian regionalism until very recently when it was admitted to the East Asia Summit (EAS). The present ASEAN concern over China appears greater than the previous concern over Japan, because China appears potentially more overwhelming than Japan. Apart from its larger size, China is also able to forge international groupings that do not include the United States and its allies. An example of this is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that successfully held its tenth summit in Kazakhstan in June 2011. The Chinese ability to act independently is welcomed in certain ASEAN quarters; however, simultaneously raises concerns as to what its real intentions are, especially in Southeast Asia.

The Spratly Islands in the South China Sea are a typical example of tension in Southeast Asia where Chinese claims conflict with those of many ASEAN countries. Recently, two ASEAN claimants, Vietnam and the Philippines have struck a harsher tone toward what they believe are Chinese incursions into their territory. To allay the fears of ASEAN and the rest of the world over China’s peaceful ascent, China sent its highest-ever delegate, the Minister of National Defense, General Liang Guanglie, to the Asia Security Summit (ASS) of the 10th Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2011. General Liang in a speech in one of the plenary sessions of the Dialogue reiterated that China will follow the path of peaceful development.\(^3\)

This article is divided into two parts. It first elaborates on these developments and then second it considers the views held by ASEAN members on East Asian