

The Obama-Xi Summit: Whither ASEAN?

by Julio Amador III

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The Obama-Xi summit held at Sunnylands in Rancho Mirage, California had a full agenda. In the two-day meeting, President Barack Obama and President Xi Jinping discussed many issues, among them North Korea, cyber security, climate change and China's territorial disputes with Japan and Southeast Asian states.

Hanging over all the discussions was Xi's stated desire to develop "a new style of great power relations." There is an underlying assumption that the relationship between these two great powers will determine the future Asia-Pacific order. Limiting our perspective to East Asia (Northeast and Southeast), it seems that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) role as the platform of dialogue for external powers has been diminished. There is evidence that ASEAN's goal of 'socializing' China into the regional norms has not fully succeeded. In fact, China went around regional norms that advocate peaceful settlement of disputes by using civilian marine surveillance ships to intimidate its rivals in the South China Sea. China was also blamed by many for the failure to issue a joint communiqué at the 45th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting.

At the same time, the US rebalance to the Asia Pacific also poses a challenge to ASEAN unity. Some states welcome it as a counterweight to China; other states have been silent but accept that the US should still play a key role in regional affairs. The remaining states have not been supportive but have not expressed explicit opposition either.

Are the member-states of ASEAN destined to be mere pawns in the US-China chessboard? Surely, this is not the case. After taking office, China's new foreign minister, Wang Yi, went on a charm offensive to states in Southeast Asia that have no adversarial relationship with China to offset the negative impact of its perceived hold over Cambodia during Phnom Penh's chairmanship of ASEAN. The US has also actively engaged the region by energizing old alliances, establishing new partnerships, and fixing ties with Myanmar. All of these suggest that Southeast Asia will be one of the major arenas that demonstrate how the US-China relationship develops. But could Southeast Asia, especially ASEAN, play an active role in shaping that relationship?

Institutionally, ASEAN should – as it has always sought – remain autonomous in a regional system dominated by great powers. Regional norms and a supposedly unified approach to engaging extra-regional partners are ASEAN's ways of

preventing subordination to great powers intent on pushing their own agendas. Given the lack of a unified security and foreign policy, ASEAN will have to accept that external players will always use 'divide and conquer' tactics to deal with member-states.

For ASEAN to be an effective player in regional politics, it has to address fundamental problems. First, the development gap among member-states should be addressed. It goes almost without saying that this is premised on continued prosperity among the more developed countries in ASEAN. Only states that have the resources and capacity to mobilize resources can withstand pressure from more powerful states. Only a developed ASEAN that is interdependent with great powers can withstand threats of economic blackmail or bullying.

Second, the quest for a regional identity must be consistently pursued. Beyond the symbolism of flying the ASEAN flag in member-states' embassies or using the ASEAN emblem in official documents, a true people-to-people campaign must be initiated and sustained. This means that ASEAN's peoples from Myanmar to the Philippines must recognize that there is a unifying regional identity beyond the citizenship that they hold. This demands that ASEAN's activities move beyond foreign ministries and other government agencies; ASEAN consciousness must seep through to villages and towns.

Finally, this regional identity must translate into a shared acceptance of threats and challenges: whatever threatens one member-state, be it disease or external actors, must also be felt as a threat by other member-states. This will be the litmus test of ASEAN cohesion because it is based on a shared concern for fellow Southeast Asians.

These proposals are embedded in most ASEAN documents but the diplomatic crises that the region has faced are proof that commitments are not necessarily deliverables. ASEAN must do more if it wants to ensure autonomy in the face of great power rivalry. Only by acting together more often can ASEAN negotiate a regional order that will allow it to serve as an effective mediator between China, the US, and other powerful states. The basic structure, the East Asia Summit (EAS), is already in place. Much depends on how ASEAN uses this forum to secure regional peace and stability.

The East Asian regional order has been challenged since China decided that its influence should be greater amid heightened perceptions of US decline. Nevertheless, the US retains primacy by having the most powerful military and its continuing potential for economic dynamism. While China may view itself as the primary power in East Asia, surrounding states, especially in ASEAN, are also on the rise and may not be keen to accept a Chinese-dominated regional order. Thus, US rebalancing is welcome because it continues to underpin ASEAN's role as a non-threatening platform.

To continue in that role and to have an effective place in the new regional order, ASEAN must commit itself to more regionalism, not less. ASEAN will need to play a stronger role as a primary shaper of regional norms and that can only happen if there is more internal cohesion.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.