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Asean's South China Sea conundrum

Asean's less-than-unified response on the South China Sea issue highlights how China has become the dalang or puppet master of states in the region.

Victor R. Savage

For The Straits Times



Filipino protesters calling on China to respect their rights in the South China Sea in front of the Chinese consular office in Manila in August. China sees its relations with Asean as a zero-sum game because the SCS and the region has become its non-negotiable geopolitical turf. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

The South China Sea (SCS) contestations have brought Asean into direct diplomatic headwinds with China. Just when one thinks there is sufficient reason for the regional grouping to close ranks and speak with one voice, it would seem that the opposite is happening. Asean responses to the SCS issue are less than unified and reflect four issues.

First, Asean states are buying into China's SCS rhetoric that only the four claimant countries need to negotiate directly with China and the other non-claimant states should mind their own business. If Asean members fall into this diplomatic trap, the regional organisation will fragment and lose its political clout.

The geopolitical reality is that all Asean states have a stake in the South China Sea because the seas have been an integral part of the region of South-east Asia for millennia. Acquiescing to China's hegemonic ownership of the SCS will have profound geopolitical ramifications in the future for Asean.

Second, there is clearly a lack of regional leadership in Asean currently. Gone are the days when Indonesia's president Suharto took a strong but not dominating role in steering Asean as a cohesive voice regionally and internationally. Current president Joko Widodo lacks a strong domestic political base and that has undermined his regional leadership.

Third, Asean countries are facing various levels of domestic political instability and economic challenges which have prevented governments from taking independent national stands on the South China Sea.

Myanmar and the Philippines have new untested administrations, Thailand is mired in questions over the government's political legitimacy, Laos and Cambodia are politically fragile, Malaysia is becoming more racially divided under a leader facing corruption charges, and Brunei has been hit by falling oil prices and is in transition to a new head of state. Even between states, historical animosities still fester. The Philippines, for example, in their marine territorial claims include the Sulu Archipelago's links with Sabah (East Malaysia).

Fourth, the weak political state and economic dependence of Asean's governments and leadership have left the states beholden to the Chinese government. China is pumping hundreds of millions of dollars into Asean states through varied ways to prop governments up, maintain current leadership regimes and keep national economies alive.

The latest evidence of this was Thailand's "illegal detention" and expulsion of Hong Kong student activist Joshua Wong, reportedly in response to China's wishes. At Bangkok's airport, Mr Wong was refused admission into Thailand to give a talk at Chulalongkorn University to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the massacre of leftist students protesting at Thammasat University. To put it in wayang kulit (shadow play) terminology, China has become the dalang or puppet master of states in the region.

While other powers are courting Asean countries over the South China Sea with informal summits and meetings (the United States at Sunnylands, Russia at Sochi and Japan), China sees its relations with Asean as a zero-sum game because the SCS and the region has become its non-negotiable geopolitical turf. Hence China shows its blatant displeasure of states that choose not to support or take a neutral stand on the South China Sea. That is the backdrop to a recent diplomatic row between Singapore and China over a report in tabloid newspaper Global Times.

Whether Asean states like it or not, the US-China contestation over the South China Sea has foregrounded Asean into global visibility; the regional organisation is not a ringside observer but a participant in this territorial debacle and the global community is watching.

INTO THE VACUUM

Taking sides in this global superpower contest poses a dilemma for small states in the region. Asean's founding members were cradled and supported by Western democracies in the grouping's early decades, and these states, especially their armed forces personnel and bureaucracies, feel a certain loyalty to the US and its allies. Only a new leader like President Rodrigo Duterte, coming into power without political and economic baggage, can take a maverick stand on ending US military support in the Philippines.

At the same time, one cannot blame some Asean states for adopting an ambivalent or pro-China stand in the US-China contestation over the South China Sea. The transition phase in global power hegemony between the US and China will play itself out in the next couple of decades.

Decades ago, the Raffles professor of history at the University of Malaya (in Singapore), Dr C. Northcote Parkinson, argued that the decay of a civilisation leaves a vacuum and forces the rival to rise and take over; this creates resistance not without friction and a new vigour.

On both sides of the superpower spectrum, there is cause for worry by Asean states about the future of the region. President Xi Jinping perceives a vacuum in global power politics which he wants China to fill but he first needs to resolve a domestic power struggle.

In the US, the presidential race is causing uneasiness. A Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton win might create major changes in US policies to China and the region. Certainly incumbent President Barack Obama's Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) initiative might go up in smoke and leave many Asean and Pacific US allies feeling betrayed.

Under previous global hegemons, links were developed over time in a laissez-faire manner. China does not want to leave this to chance. Its initiation of the ambitious One Belt, One Road programme is to ensure all roads (terrestrial and marine) lead to Beijing and to underscore its traditional role as the "Middle Kingdom".

CHINA'S SOFT POWER DISSIPATED

China's handling of the South China Sea claims puts its neighbours on geopolitical, defence and strategic alert. It has catalysed widespread defence build-ups and military alliances by states around it. The goodwill it accumulated in development aid, infrastructure building, economic cooperation and trade linkages with developing countries has been undermined by the unilateral claims to the SCS. Its soft-power capital has dissipated.

No one wants to say this, but China's South China Sea claims must be viewed as a foreign policy failure, without long-term risk analysis and devoid of an understanding of regional sensitivities.

For a region with a bitter after-taste of Western colonisation, the Chinese marine territorial annexation is neo-colonialism in disguise and unbecoming of Marxist ideals. Its current leaders have bulldozed their way as a display of its emerging superpower status in a way that Deng Xiaoping would have cautioned against and certainly resisted implementing without first securing sustained domestic economic stability.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Associate Professor Victor R. Savage retired from the National University of Singapore Geography Department in June and is currently adviser at its Office of Alumni Relations.

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