

Could ASEAN Become a Mediator in the US-China Relations?

The Southeast Asian Block's Peace, Security and Stability Vectors Could Stabilise an Otherwise Downspiralling Relation

Southeast Asia continues to witness a **diplomatically dense period**. Last week, the **Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi**, has paid a fruitful visit to several Southeast Asian countries. On this occasion, Cambodia, widely regarded as one of the closest countries to China (*not necessarily geographically*), has signed a free trade agreement with Beijing. In the Philippines, the joint oil exploration project with China has been brought back, despite the on-going territorial disputes. Malaysia declared its readiness to cooperate with China, despite having blocked six Chinese fishing vessels in its territorial waters off Johor. The Chinese Foreign Minister did not miss the chance to accuse the United States of “*stirring up confrontation*” in the Asia Pacific and alluded to the Quad (Australia, India, Japan & US format) as a “*security risk*” in the region. Only several days before, the Quad meeting reunited the foreign ministers of Japan, India, Australia and the US in Tokyo. Minister Wang did not miss the chance to warn against a “*dangerous and slippery*” step, likening the Quad to the role played by NATO in Europe.

Last Sunday, the **Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide** started his first tour abroad by visiting Vietnam, a country largely viewed as having one of the strongest positions on China within ASEAN, and Indonesia, the host of the ASEAN Secretariat and the driving force of the regional organisation. Undoubtedly, Minister Suga's choice to visit Southeast Asia signals a continuation of Shinzo Abe's geopolitical project. In fact, Abe's project of uniting the two Asian oceans, the Indian and the Pacific, by forming the Quad, has been accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The launch of the *Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI)* by Japan, India and Australia, in order to reduce their supply chains dependence on China encouraged Japanese companies to either “*come back home*” or to relocate in Southeast Asia. The effects have been immediately visible: Myanmar approved the construction of a Japan-Burma special economic zone in the state of Mon and a deal has been reached between Japanese *Tokyo Gas* and Filipino *First Gen* to build an off-shore terminal of Liquefied Natural Gas in the island of Luzon. Vietnam also agreed to a US\$ 348 million dollars loan from Japan in order to build patrol vessels. Of course, SCRI is likely to impact more the medium and small enterprises, which makes it harder to quantify, at the time, the real scale and effects of the Initiative.

In fact, **the on-going diplomatic developments in ASEAN signal a strong will to diversify their international cooperation in order to maintain a neutral stance, not only with regard to China and the US, but similarly with any other emerging poles of power, in Asia or beyond.** While ASEAN's neutrality, accommodated

with an institutional respect for each of its members sovereignty, is a well-known fact, the perspective of ASEAN as a broker of peace, security and stability is a scenario worth investigating. **US-China competition for influence and power has all the chances to become the most significant process of the 21st century.** On one hand, China has proven as an assertive actor in the international arena, claiming waterways in South China Sea, as well as extending its maritime claims to Japan. Its international vocation has long been presented in media in the lights of the **Belt and Road Initiative**. On the other hand, the US started to implement its countermeasures: **Obama's pivot to Asia and Trump's trade war**. This twist of events did not put ASEAN in a hopeless and unpredictable situation; on the contrary, it toughened its neutral stance – along with its international legitimacy – to project a responsible and consistent international actor.

The US-China rivalry also represents a window of opportunity for the ASEAN block. Exploring strategic pathways in terms of a common foreign policy approach in order to position itself as a mediator and security broker in the Washington-Beijing row, **would provide the Southeast Asian regional organisation with outstanding diplomatic, economic and security assets in the long run.** A strategic position that would ensure ASEAN's stability, security and economic prosperity could be based on a **multilateral engagement with other major economies, built on economic pragmatism and pertinent to the block's security needs.** Such a position has been iterated by Indonesia with its *"bebas aktif"* (transl. independent and vigorous) foreign affairs principle, which enhanced the country's position not only in terms of bilateral relations, but also at UN-level.

The attention received by ASEAN, visible not only in the bilateral visits from US, Europe, China and Japan, but similarly reflected in the economic exchanges of the block, **is a strong indicator of the importance attached to the Southeast regional organisation.**

Economically, the ASEAN market has integrated both US and Chinese enterprises in a transparent and open fashion. In the aftermath of the trade wars, many Chinese enterprises have relocated or opened branches in Southeast Asia to avoid the export restrictions. Of course, at the same time, ASEAN received major investments and signed landmark agreements with EU and Japan. From a **security standpoint,** both China and the US, along with other world and regional powers, are together with ASEAN member states in ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). **Politically,** ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation has been signed by over 38 parties, including the organisation's members, China and the Quad members.

ASEAN's durable linkages to both US and China, in economic, security and political terms cannot be denied, thus significantly diminishing the decoupling scenario. Of course, a potentially aggressive behaviour of China in Southeast Asia could easily turn ASEAN toward the US. Likewise, the belief that China would cement her influence worldwide, particularly in Asia, would push ASEAN to hop on the Chinese bandwagon. So far, none of these seemed plausible scenarios and the path of multilateral diplomacy, maximizing economic and political concessions from both Washington and Beijing, while diversifying political capital seems to have been preferred. Wisely, this course of action allowed ASEAN to maintain its foreign policy autonomy and consolidate itself as a block.

A further step forward would be **turning the accumulated political capital and legitimacy toward a concerted ASEAN effort of US-China mediation**. ASEAN's policies, ideas and cultural values have evolved into a collective body known as the "ASEAN Way". By its sheer existence, ASEAN signaled that cooperation is the first step to achieve cohesion and peace through mutually and consensual norms. The "ASEAN Way" could further extend its already time-tested scope and practice at a wider scale.

Practically, a first step would be involving both US and China in its drafting process of a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. So far, China has preferred to settle its disputes bilaterally. Multilateral consultations would favour all the actors, without fueling unnecessary "zero game theories". **Institutionally**, ASEAN could create new formats that would reduce the Asia-Pacific tensions and create venues for pragmatic economic, political and security cooperation. Obviously, **the more mechanisms are established, the costlier it becomes for either China and the US to harm not only their bilateral relations but also their linkages with ASEAN**.

Acting as a mediator is, in fact, ASEAN's golden chance to fill a gap in the international politics. So far, no international or regional organisation has been committed to engage in such a daring process. By stepping up as a regional organisation with a global vocation, ASEAN would not only reaffirm the value of the "ASEAN Way", but also prove its international worth.

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