The End of ASEAN Centrality?

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ASEAN suffered a major loss of face, at least in the perceptions of some international media and academic experts, owing to its failure to issue its customary Joint Communique at its last ministerial meeting (ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, or the AMM) in Cambodia held during July 9-13. The reason, as has been widely reported, was the refusal of Cambodia as the ASEAN Chair to incorporate the positions of Philippines and Vietnam regarding their dispute with China over the South China Sea. As a result, the idea of ASEAN centrality, which assumes that ASEAN, rather than the great powers like China, Japan, the US or India, should be the building bloc and hub of developing a wider Asian or Asia-Pacific regional architecture, is facing a severe test. But there may be some silver linings and useful lessons which, if acted upon, can put ASEAN in a better position to move forward.

Much has been made of the fact that this was the first time ASEAN had failed to issue a joint communique in its 45 years history. The infightings and putdowns inside the AMM deliberations, based on leaked accounts that led to the impasse in Phnom Penh, have become public, causing further embarrassment to ASEAN.

But ASEAN’s rise to regional and international prominence has never been smooth. The ASEAN process ground to a virtual halt in 1968-1969 over the Philippines’ claim to Sabah. Moreover, the expansion of its membership and functions has its costs and consequences.

ASEAN now not only includes all ten countries of Southeast Asia, it has taken on the additional role of being in the “driver’s seat” of larger regional bodies like the ARF and EAS, bodies that include all the great powers of the world today.

In particular, the crisis brings to the fore one of the concerns that some of us had highlighted about ASEAN’s expansion to include the CLMV (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) in the 1990s.¹ These included the possibility that the entry of Vietnam would make the South China Sea issue even more of a “frontline” issue for ASEAN, as Hanoi was surely to seek ASEAN’s diplomatic backing over the dispute with Beijing, and that the new members may not always obey the traditional norms of ASEAN like the consensus principle. For the new members, joining ASEAN would bring benefits, including for Cambodia which should now spend less time than was the traditionally the case in worrying about interference by its neighbours in its domestic affairs. For ASEAN, it was the realization of its dream of “One Southeast Asia”.

The crisis also puts a spotlight on the role of Cambodia in ASEAN, which has been a major part of the ASEAN story.

It is ironic that the ASEAN’s recent discomfiture occurred in Cambodia, and was the result of Cambodia’s own action in blocking the joint declaration. Without ASEAN’s role in seeking a negotiated solution to the decade long Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia that ousted the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime, there may not be a sovereign Cambodia to day. Cambodia may still be languishing under foreign intervention or as an international pariah.

Moreover, this is not the first time that Cambodia’s engagement with ASEAN has been problematic. When ASEAN was founded in 1967, Sihanouk refused to join the groping out of deference to his neutral foreign policy stance. In July 1997, Hun Sen’s “coup” against co-premier Norodom Ranarridh led ASEAN to postpone Cambodia’s imminent accession to ASEAN. Singapore’s Foreign Minister described the coup as a violation of ASEAN’s principle of “unconstitutional change” of government.

Hun Sen also alarmed fellow ASEAN members, especially his Thai neighbor, by hosting fugitive former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and even appointing him as a personal advisor in November 2009. This went against the established ASEAN principle that granting support to a fugitive from a member state would constitute an act of interference in the internal affairs of that member state.

Will Cambodia go all the way in deferring to China, as American political scientist Donald Emmerson has speculated in an Asia Times article (appearing on July 24th) in which he referred to Cambodia’s “spoiler’s role as a proxy for Beijing?” The costs to Cambodia of being China’s proxy would be too high. Such an action would severely isolate it from its neighbours. As Norodom Sihanouk, when he was still the king of Cambodia, once told this author, Cambodia does not want to be a supplicant to a great power and that his country would always need to be watchful about China’s intentions because of China’s size and proximity to Cambodia.

And even if Cambodia decided to defer to China to the detriment of ASEAN unity, how much would it matter?

There will be another ASEAN Chair next year, and the damage done by Cambodia could be easily undone. Indonesian Foreign Minister Natalegawa’s efforts after the Phnom Penh episode has already proved useful in reversing ASEAN’s setback to some extent, and is a diplomatic slap on the face of Cambodia, diminishing its stature as ASEAN chair and depriving it of an opportunity to showcase its own diplomatic maturity.

In justifying its decision to block the Communique, Cambodia’s has since clarified (in its 26 July note) that “The AMM is not a court that could rule against or in favor of anybody, in relation to bilateral disputes.”

But those ASEAN members which disagreed with Cambodia argued, according to minutes of the AMM, that:

- The recent developments have a new dimension since they took place in the EEZ and CS of sovereign States; and invoke novel interpretations of international law and are contrary to the 1982 UNCLOS and the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea;

- These recent developments implicate the claimant States and significant affect long term peace and stability in the region;

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2 “Clarification on Non-Issuance of the 45th AMM Joint Communiqué,” 26 July 2012.
Reference to these recent developments in the Joint Communiqué is a statement of facts, and does not indicate that ASEAN takes sides or delivers judgement on territorial and jurisdictional claims of the claimant States;

Failure to mention the recent developments in the AMM Joint Communiqué would seriously undermine ASEAN’s credibility and unity, which are the basis of ASEAN’s centrality. It is a normal practice that the Joint Communiqué may refer to global issues or issues that concern one or two Member States which affect regional peace and stability, such as the Cambodia-Thailand border dispute or Myanmar.

As a matter of fact, it has never been an official ASEAN policy to specifically exclude discussion or mention of bilateral disputes involving non-ASEAN members or between an ASEAN member and an outside party. And China is certainly an ASEAN member. Moreover, the Joint Communique of the 44th AMM hosted by Indonesia, did specifically refer to the Thai-Cambodia border dispute (Part IV, Para 103), urging the two sides “peacefully resolve their differences through political dialogue and negotiations...with appropriate engagement of Indonesia”. And whether the South China Sea dispute is really a purely bilateral dispute can be questioned, and Cambodia’s stance is inconsistent with ASEAN’s own policy of talking to China multilaterally over this issue.

Cambodia can ill afford to weaken ASEAN. Membership in ASEAN has been about the best thing that happened to Cambodia’s national interest and foreign policy (or for that matter to the foreign policy of other CLMV countries). Only through ASEAN that Cambodia can realistically hope to have any real voice and role in international and regional affairs than what it can manage on its own. Cambodia should learn its own lesson from the crisis and not hold the whole organization to its misperceived and short-term interests.

What is more significant that other ASEAN members, including original members Singapore and Malaysia, had supported a more direct reference to the South China Dispute that Cambodia managed to scuttle. Indeed, a few years ago, some analysts had believed that Malaysia might defect and support China’s claims in the South China Sea in support for concessions from China, including recognition of its own claims in the disputed area. Yet, this time, Malaysia showed little sign of any special understanding with China on the dispute.

Even if ASEAN Foreign Ministers do not manage to issue the formal communiqué that was withheld in Phnom Penh, the six-point statement issued by the Cambodian Foreign Minister will help ASEAN to regain some of its lost image. But it is too much to call this as the end of ASEAN.

There is little question that Hun Sen’s refusal to accommodate Philippines and Vietnam resulted at least partly from Chinese pressure. According to a highly placed source, the Chinese specifically reminded the Cambodians that Sihanouk, as the leader of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), had accepted the Chinese claims on the South China Sea. For background, the CGDK was the resistance coalition that had fought the Vietnamese occupiers (and the Hanoi-installed Heng Samarin regime of which Hun Sen was a young member) of Cambodia in exile with Chinese, ASEAN and Western assistance. Even if this is true, one should keep in mind that Sihanouk’s stance was made under duress, when he needed Chinese help to fight the Vietnamese occupation.

The crisis may have some silver linings. It will be a useful wake-up call for ASEAN.

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3 http://www.asean.org/documents/44thAMM-PMC-18thARF/44thAMM-JC.pdf
One of the most critical challenges facing ASEAN is the need to strengthen the ASEAN Secretariat. Apparently, three officials from the secretariat, including two Cambodians, were sent to Phnom Penh to spend weeks before the Ministerial meeting. But they provided no forewarning of the coming crisis. This suggests either that the secretariat staff lacked the necessary analytic skills, or that valuable information was deliberately withheld for the sake of parochial national interests. It shows that ASEAN as an institution is yet to develop a mindset that rises above national positions and serves the common interest of the organization when the situation demands. It is noteworthy that none other than the current ASEAN Secretary-General, Dr Surin Pitsuwan, had provided a detailed account (entitled “ASEAN’s Challenges”) of his secretariat’s shortcomings with recommendations for improving its efficiency. These steps need to be urgently implemented.

Cambodia’s handling of its ASEAN chairmanship in 2012 has been significantly below par. This should be a warning to Myanmar, which assumes the chairmanship in 2014. While not all new members have handled leadership positions badly, and Cambodia itself organized a very successful AMM and ARF meeting in 2003, Myanmar should strive its best to restore and advance ASEAN’s image.

ASEAN should also take note that the mood on ASEAN has soured in Beijing. Chinese officials, after developing a close and positive relationship with ASEAN for decades, increasingly view it (and regional multilateral cooperation more generally) as a threat, rather than a prop, to its great power ambitions. Yet Beijing needs to remind itself, if one was needed, that its soft power and influence in the region depends on working with and supporting ASEAN, not undermining it. Rising power does not equate to rising influence or respect in the absence of a policy of restraint towards smaller neighbours, something Indonesia has preached and practiced towards its ASEAN neighbours since the fall of Sukarno. Hence, it is appropriate that it was the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Matry Natalegawa, who undertook the damage control mission on behalf of ASEAN after the Cambodia setback.

ASEAN also should be careful in being perceived as pursuing an overtly pro-US agenda at the expense of China. America’s role at the most recent ASEAN meetings (especially the ARF) has received less media attention in the region that Hillary Clinton’s intervention at the 2010 Hanoi ARF meeting where she drew the ire of his Chinese counterpart by drawing attention to the South China Sea conflict. Many Chinese officials believe that America’s “interference” has internationalized the South China Sea conflict and harmed China’s national interests. This perception is of course in correct, but ASEAN, including Indonesian Foreign Minister Nataleawa, should convey to Beijing that ASEAN is acting on its own interests, not America’s no matter how much the two coincide.

Next, ASEAN’s original members have a special responsibility to rise up to the occasion and guide ASEAN at this critical juncture. Indonesia has done that, but Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Philippines and Brunei (which joined ASEAN in 1984) also need to enhance their role to prevent future setbacks such as that happened in Phnom Penh.

Some of the recent commentaries on the Cambodia AMM have missed the fact that the Phnom Penh, ASEAN adopted the terms of reference for the ASEAN Institute of Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR). Even more important, just after the Cambodia AMM, Thailand and Cambodia pulled out their troops (to be replaced by their border police pending an International Court of Justice verdict on the dispute next year) from the disputed Preah Vihear temple area, thereby diffusing a major point of intra-ASEAN conflict for the past years.

Finally, the degree of cohesion expected of ASEAN, including by experts who had suddenly taken an interest in the organization because of its growing prominence during the past few years, is unrealistic. It is useful to keep in mind what regional organizations can and cannot do. ASEAN is an intergovernmental organization of sovereign states. Witness the current disarray within MERCOSUR, another prominent subregional group in the world which is often compared with ASEAN, over the suspension of Paraguay (over the legal impeachment of its President) and its induction of Venezuela as a
member. And after three years, the EU the “role model” of regional organizations is still struggling to contain an deteriorating economic crisis with a show of unity and efficiency.

To conclude, the idea of ASEAN centrality is under challenge, but it is too early to pronounce it as dead. Critics are right to question whether ASEAN has the ability to shoulder such a responsibility and ASEAN should draw lessons from the Phnom Penh AMM. But one should not jump to conclusions about ASEAN’s future on the basis of the embarrassment it suffered in Phnom Penh.

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