



POINTS OF VIEW

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ASEAN Faces Formidable Challenges Post COVID-19

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Since its inception in 1967, ASEAN has been able to navigate its relations with all major powers during and after the Cold War. All members, old and new, have been able to enjoy peace and stability, allowing them to focus their energies on nation-building and economic development. At this juncture, the ASEAN Community is moving forward and has become more integrated than ever before as it works to fulfilling the ASEAN Vision 2025.

During this period, the grouping has gained valuable experience in engaging with the great powers that have wielded both political and economic influence in the region. In the past five years, due to the leadership and policy changes in the US associated with former President Donald Trump, the US global role has been undermined in its creditability affecting regional security landscape. Furthermore, the so-called America First policy has also tarnished Washington's international profile and goodwill.

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Although the Biden Administration has now been at the helm for nearly four months, the remnants of Trump's key foreign policy remain unchanged, notably the ongoing US-China tension. In fact, the level of rivalry between these two powers has increased due to the surge of US criticism against China's human rights record.

The US-China rivalry has now become a cast-iron reflection of international relations and no country can ignore this momentous development. Of late, ASEAN has concerned about the trajectory of their heated exchanges and possible impacts on individual ASEAN members or the grouping as a whole. Last month, the ASEAN chair, Brunei Darussalam, had to instruct its foreign ministers to organise special ministerial meetings with the US and China ahead of the annual ASEAN conference in early August. These two meetings are significant as they will kick off the Biden administration's relations with ASEAN, just as China is commemorating its 30th anniversary of their relations.

Given its unique geographical location and geo-strategic value in the middle of the Indo-Pacific region, ASEAN will have important roles to play in maintaining the balance of power among great power with multiple interests beyond the US and China and in preserving regional peace and stability as well as its centrality.

Looking ahead, two important trends must be discerned, both of which will influence on the future of ASEAN and its strategic environment. First, the competing visions of the international order is the most important topic that the ASEAN leaders have to ponder. The rise of China, especially its diplomatic outreach during the COVID-19 pandemic, has now seriously challenged the longstanding international order mapped out by the West, led by the US.

Washington fears that Beijing would now be able to disrupt the international rules it has dominated since World War II. The Biden administration is trying to garner support from allies and

friends in the region to counter China's rise. But so far, the US has not been successful because ASEAN does not want to be lured into the US-China power-play. It remains to be seen whether the rise of China can erode the international order as we know it.

From the regional perspective, China covets international recognition of its growing economic and political power in the international arena. That helps explain why China since 2013 has been quite active in promoting all forms of multilateral cooperation. The most notably is the current Belt and Road Initiative which has infrastructural programmes and activities across Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe. Beijing also would like to have a greater voice and representation in international institutions in proportional to its national power.

As a treaty to the US and a close friend with China, Thailand has been pursuing proactive engagements with both in all areas including security fields. Over the past years, the country also serves as a venue for cooperation between the US and China. For instance, since 2014 China has been invited by Thailand and the US to take part in the annual Thai-US military exercise for humanitarian operations including disaster management.

The second trend is the growing economic dependence on China. During the pandemic, where trade outputs around the world have dropped due to the disruption in the global value chains, China's trade volume with ASEAN during the first quarter of 2020 reached US\$140 billion, which has turned ASEAN into China's No. 1 trading partner, replacing the European Union. This upward trade volume will continue as China has quickly recovered from the pandemic and continued to boost trade and invest in ASEAN.

Meanwhile, ASEAN still relies on the US for its security guarantee, which has been the cornerstone for the region's stability in the past seven decades. Political pundits fervently believe that this dichotomy will eventually become a contributing factor that would force the ASEAN

member countries to choose sides. So far, they have avoided such bifurcated views. Judging from their diplomatic history, they would continue to maintain the much-valued strategic autonomy for as long as possible without jeopardising their ASEAN stands.

In the past 16 months, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced regional countries to pay more attention to domestic agenda due to the severity of the coronavirus and its repercussions on public health and the country's economic performance. With the US and China wooing the grouping for closer ties and cooperation, it is likely that the ASEAN members will first accord domestic situations as criteria to engage both powers. Obviously, in the beginning as expected, this will create a fault line among the ASEAN members due to different domestic constituencies. However, when a collective decision is made within ASEAN vis-à-vis the two superpowers, the ASEAN members often go for a consensus, no matter how long it is going to take. Therefore, their decision would be bipartisan, not ally them with either side.

Perhaps, the time has come for ASEAN to take a new initiative to engage the US and China by inviting them to participate in the so-called ASEAN plus two summit formula. Since 1997, the leaders of ASEAN have been holding the so-called ASEAN Plus Three Summit with China, Japan and South Korea. The summit has proved highly successful to zero in on common programs that ASEAN and the three Asian economic powerhouses can do together. A few weeks after the coronavirus ran rampage the leaders of ASEAN, China, and South Korea immediately held the virtual meeting in February 2020 to forge a comprehensive action plan to deal with the challenges posed by the pandemic.

In a similar vein, during the year-end ASEAN-related summit, the leaders from the US and China could join the ten ASEAN colleagues in an exclusive meeting with specific agendas set by ASEAN. The forum will allow the ASEAN leaders to reach out both powers simultaneously to

identify common areas for cooperation. ASEAN can turn the US-China competition into cooperation if this new formula is accepted and deployed.

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