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BEYOND US-CHINA RELATIONS: ASEAN IN AN EVOLVING REGIONAL ORDER IN ASIA

Tsutomu Kikuchi

- Asia is facing the challenge of whether it can sustain the rule-based regional order or not.
- To tackle this challenge, we need to look beyond US-China relations.
- Contrary to the conventional view, “the rest of Asia” will play the critical role in defining the future of Asia. ASEAN is the crucial player among “the rest of Asia.” Accordingly, the ASEAN countries must free themselves of the misconception that they are sandwiched between the US and China.

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The pressing challenge facing Asia is whether we can sustain and enhance the rule-based regional order that has provided the basic foundation for peace and prosperity for the last several decades, or must leave the region at the mercy of power politics among the major powers. Asia should be a region where disputes are resolved by rules, not power.

The role of ASEAN is important to sustain and enhance the rule-based regional order. ASEAN could very much contribute to enhancing the rule-based regional order if the member countries free themselves of the misconception that they are sandwiched between the US and China and recognize their potential in evolving regional politics.

Beyond US-China Relations

Competition between the US and China continues to intensify, but we need to look beyond US-China relations to address the challenges facing Asia.

It seems to me that Asians are too much preoccupied with the mindset/mental framework of seeing the future of Asia only from the perspective of the US-China competition. People say that we are “sandwiched” between the US and China. This mindset prevents us from thinking creatively.

My view is that international relations in Asia today differ from those of the past (in the history of world politics), when the big powers defined the regional order.

It is popular to discuss the future of Asia from the perspective of a “power transition.” According to this perspective, the key players defining the future of Asia are the US and China. There are many scenarios for US-China relations, from continued US hegemony, hegemony by China, and a G2 or US-China condominium to a Cold War-style confrontation.

However, these scenarios will not happen in the foreseeable future. The US is no longer a full-fledged regional hegemon. China is not a full-fledged rising power. Both the US and China have numerous vulnerabilities and constraints internally and externally. Indeed, there are many pressing domestic agendas to address in both countries. The instability of divided domestic politics in both

countries will continue to prevent them from creatively exercising their powers externally.

The divided politics in Washington and the inward-looking attitude of the US public against foreign engagements make us very much concerned about continued US engagement in Asia. Ironically, China is struggling to maintain its domestic stability after decades of remarkable economic growth. Economic slowdown further aggravates China's internal contradictions. Thus, neither the US nor China will sustain the Asian regional order alone.

Given the huge gaps in policy preferences and basic values between the US and China, the emergence of a firmly-consolidated G2 providing the basic structure for Asia will be impossible as long as China has a communist regime.

On the other hand, given the deepened economic interdependence and the dense bilateral institutional mechanisms for policy coordination between the US and China, a Cold War-style confrontation would be difficult to imagine.

The Era of "the Rest of Asia"

Both the US and China need help and support from "the rest of Asia." "The rest of Asia" refers to all countries other than the US and China. Indeed, there are several countries in Asia that have substantial political, economic and military power. They are not just pawns in the US-China competition. They have the willingness, strength and determination to affect the future of Asia.

How "the rest of Asia" steer their respective policies in the coming years will significantly affect the future of Asia. In this regard, I am thinking that Asia is now entering into the era of "the rest of Asia."

Actually, the US and China are struggling to win the hearts and minds of "the rest of Asia" through the US' pivot/rebalance policy and China's AIIB (Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank) and "One Belt, One Road(OBOR)" initiative. The US and China need the support and cooperation of "the rest of Asia" to pursue their respective policy agendas.

Furthermore, Asian economies are interconnected through dense networks of cross-border production and distribution. To sustain these networks, the US and China need the support of the other countries. This is clearly

demonstrated in the negotiations for the TPP (Trans Pacific Partnership) and the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership).

This gives “the rest of Asia” much room for maneuverability and strengthens their bargaining position in their respective relations with the US and China.

Put simply, the future of Asia will largely depend upon how “the rest of Asia” will respond to the emerging challenges.

For “the rest of Asia,” the rule-based regional order is indispensable, because this rule-based order protects them. Strong rules protect smaller countries more than bigger ones. Disputes will be resolved by rules, not power.

ASEAN and ASEAN-related Regional Institutions

The critical player for the rule-based regional order is ASEAN. Today, ASEAN is engaged in establishing the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC), one of the three pillars of the ASEAN Community. The APSC has two aspects: an intra-ASEAN aspect and an extra-ASEAN aspect.

First, APSC is aiming at harmonizing the internal (domestic) institutions of member countries according to liberal principles such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law and good governance. Shared liberal norms and institutions among the members serve as a foundation for security and prosperity in Southeast Asia.

Second, Southeast Asia is a region where extra-regional powers’ interests intersect. ASEAN’s security is, therefore, closely connected with what relationships are established between the ASEAN countries and extra-ASEAN powers. To sustain a stable regional security environment in Southeast Asia, ASEAN designed a security architecture that included ASEAN’s relations with extra-ASEAN countries, especially the major powers. Thus, ASEAN has successfully established a variety of regional institutions around ASEAN.

ASEAN has been skillfully managing relations with the major powers through ASEAN-related regional institutions. ASEAN is proud of maintaining its “centrality” in managing regional institutions.

Now is the time for ASEAN to further enhance its efforts to construct the APSC, given that power politics among the major powers is coming back to Asia. APSC will help greatly enhance the rule-based regional order in Asia.

This, however, requires ASEAN countries to free themselves from the mindset or mental framework that they are "sandwiched" between the US and China. They need to recognize more clearly their potential in Asia's power politics.

If ASEAN countries could realize their potential, a variety of regional institutions underlined by APSC would be enhanced, contributing to managing power politics among the big players. 

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