

## ASEAN still the critical catalyst for China's future

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China is making some serious strategic mistakes in its dealings with ASEAN. It is sacrificing its long-term interests in favour of short-term objectives and its global interests in favour of regional concerns. And in the process, it is undermining a critical catalyst to its peaceful rise.

China's peaceful emergence as the number two power in the world is a modern geopolitical miracle. In 1980 its share of global GDP in purchasing power parity terms, was 2 per cent—far less than the 22 per cent the US accounted for. By 2014, China's share had overtaken the United States. Normally such great-power transitions are accompanied by competition and conflict. Instead, China emerged peacefully. Why?



Many factors were responsible. Deng Xiaoping's wise geopolitical advice to 'hide and bide' China's strength was a key factor. He also called on the Chinese 'to swallow bitter humiliation'. This they did. But it is impossible to swallow bitter humiliation forever. It was inevitable that China would eventually lose its patience and lash out against perceived maritime provocations by Japan and ASEAN. We can only hope that these recent outbursts have had a cathartic and calming effect on the national psyche.

Yet China's actions with [ASEAN](#)<sup>[1]</sup> show that the anger has not abated. It is commonly believed that Chinese pressure led Cambodia to veto the ASEAN joint communique on the South China Sea in 2012. Similarly, China likely persuaded Cambodia, Laos and Thailand to walk away from the agreed ASEAN statement, later indiscreetly leaked by Malaysia.

China is one of the more rational geopolitical actors today. Unlike the United States and Russia, China's geopolitical actions are not commonly driven by emotional paroxysms. Yet China's

atypical emotional defence of the infamous 'nine-dash line' in the South China Sea goes against its larger global interests.

China is now the world's number one trading power and has been since 2014. It is also the world's biggest exporter of manufactured goods. Chinese toothbrushes and detergents arrive safely on African and Latin American shores because the world's oceans are open to freedom of navigation and safe for commercial shipping. The US Navy is inadvertently doing the Chinese economy a big favour by keeping international sea lanes open. This has facilitated the near quadrupling of China's global trade from US\$600 billion in 2004 to US\$2.2 trillion in 2015.

Yet in the same decade, when its reliance on freedom of navigation in the world's oceans increased, China prioritised regional interests ahead of its global interests. The nine-dash line, which had remained dormant for decades, suddenly surfaced in the Chinese public consciousness and the Chinese media began to defend it passionately.

It is against Chinese interests to convert any international waterway into an internal lake. This is why Wei Zongyou of Fudan University has wisely advised that: '[t]o avoid a possible maritime trap that will not only be detrimental to China's true national interests, but also negatively affect many other countries, China, as a major claimant, should think longer term and take steps to de-escalate the tension'.

The Chinese government has not decided to break up ASEAN. Indeed, it wants to strengthen ASEAN. Yet its actions have weakened ASEAN, a dangerous thing to do to an organisation that is inherently fragile—perhaps as fragile as a Ming vase.

More dangerously, China began to undermine ASEAN's unity. In theory, China can afford to alienate the ten relatively weak ASEAN member states. In practice, China is shooting itself in the foot, since ASEAN's exceptional success as a regional organisation has also facilitated China's peaceful rise.

In the 1980s the strategic alignment of interests between ASEAN, China and the United States to reverse Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia enabled China to open up to the world. In the 1990s, after the West isolated China following the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, ASEAN kept engaging with China. In the 2000s, ASEAN reacted enthusiastically to China's proposal for enhanced economic cooperation, which also coincided with China's entry into the WTO.

China has also been exceptionally generous towards ASEAN. It stunned the world by being the first major economic power to propose a free trade agreement with ASEAN, motivating other powers to follow suit. China has been equally generous in its aid programs and was the first economic power to commit to enhancing ASEAN's infrastructure. As a result, there were, until recently, massive reservoirs of goodwill towards China in ASEAN. It's a tragedy that these reservoirs are now drying up.

ASEAN had responded positively to China's generosity. It facilitated China's rise in other salient ways. By converting the Balkans of Asia into one of the most peaceful regions in the world, ASEAN helped to change the chemistry of the larger East Asia region. China should look

carefully at how Russia has been troubled by challenges in Ukraine and Syria. If Southeast Asia had emerged, like the Middle East, as a more troubled region, China would inevitably have been distracted.

Instead, ASEAN created a geopolitical oasis which helped maintain peace in East and South Asia. The annual ASEAN meetings provided the only safe and stable geopolitical platform for regional and great powers to talk to each other regularly. Whenever relations between China and Japan broke down, their leaders turned to the ASEAN meetings to restore matters.

ASEAN has therefore been a critical catalyst for the decades of peace that we have seen in the region. This is why the time has come for China to radically recalculate its interests in regards to ASEAN. Is the defence of the nine-dash line the 'core interest' of China in Southeast Asia? Or is it the continued success of ASEAN as a regional organisation promoting the culture of peace and prosperity in the broader region?

The answer almost seems obvious. This is what makes China's recent actions towards ASEAN truly puzzling. China is jeopardising its own interests in undermining ASEAN unity.

More importantly, as China's leaders frequently emphasise, China has not arrived as a modern developed power. Its per capita income is still only 25 per cent of the United States'. China still needs a few more peaceful decades to complete the job.

Ultimately, Deng Xiaoping was right when he called on the Chinese people to be patient. He was right in saying that the problem of territorial disputes should be passed to future generations. The problem of the [South China Sea](#) <sup>[2]</sup> should be put on the backburner. China's larger interests in peaceful regional chemistry should push it towards preserving and strengthening the critical catalyst that has facilitated China's rise so far.

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*This article appeared in the most recent edition of the [East Asia Forum Quarterly](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, 'Managing China'.*

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[1] ASEAN: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/09/05/is-asean-about-to-fracture/>

[2] South China Sea:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/05/21/china-divides-asean-in-the-south-china-sea/>

[3] East Asia Forum Quarterly: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/quarterly/>