

Fragile: Handle with care

Will ASEAN survive the new geopolitical competition between the US and China? | By Kishore Mahbubani

US-China relations were always destined to end in difficult territory. Whenever the world's number two power (today China) is about to overtake the world's number one power (today USA), relations inevitably get difficult. However, the inherent difficulties are likely to be aggravated by the election of Donald Trump. He has shown virtually no diplomatic restraint in his criticism of China. It does not take a political genius to conclude that US-China relations are heading towards a turbulent phase.

Sri Lankans have an ancient proverb: when elephants fight, the grass suffers. (They often add wittily that when elephants make love, the grass also suffers.) There will be many accidental victims of US-China turbulence. One of the most vulnerable candidates is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The US is tempted to use ASEAN as an instrument to embarrass China over its assertive actions in the South China Sea. Several American leaders have already spoken out on the issue, including President Barack Obama, who said: "Regional aggression that goes unchecked – whether it's southern Ukraine, or the South China Sea, or anywhere else in the world – will ultimately impact our allies, and could draw in our military." The Trump administration has been equally critical. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson

has provoked China by saying: "Building islands and then putting military assets on those islands is akin to Russia's taking of Crimea. Its taking of territory that others lay claim to."

American officials may be tempted to enlist all or part of ASEAN in their campaign to embarrass China. That would be a huge strategic mistake. It will do nothing to deter China, but ASEAN could suffer serious damage. In the growing Sino-American geopolitical competition, it is thus important that both sides treat ASEAN like a delicate Ming vase that could easily be destroyed.

In any case, the odds are stacked against the US. While America is a much stronger power than China, it is also perceived to be in decline, while China is perceived to be on the rise.

Moreover, geography matters. All of China's neighbors know that the US may be in Asia for another hundred years. However, they know that China will be around for another thousand years. It would thus be unwise for any Asian country to seriously alienate China. The clear preference of virtually all the ASEAN countries is to maintain good relations with both the US and China. They do not wish to be forced to choose between the two.

China should be equally sensitive in its relations with ASEAN. It has called for a new model of great power relations. In the



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ASEAN: Delicate, priceless, like a Ming vase

same vein, China should also create a new model of great power-smaller power relations. If China succeeds in developing a new model of great power-smaller power relations between China and ASEAN, this would help to significantly blunt the efforts of the Western media to portray China as an aggressive actor on the global scene. Hence another reason why Beijing should conduct a comprehensive review of the China-ASEAN relationship: to see how it can help serve China's larger foreign policy interests.

China should not underestimate the many collateral benefits that a good relationship between China and ASEAN can foster. As the second-most successful regional organization in the world after the EU, ASEAN's standing and prestige in the world could rise if it continues to hold together and increase its cooperation. China could therefore be associated with a global success story. Hopefully, as a result of a significant and comprehensive policy review, China will come to the conclusion that it is in its interests to strengthen, not weaken, ASEAN.

Like China, ASEAN should engage in deep reflection on the ASEAN-China relationship. This will be harder for ASEAN

to achieve, as it consists of ten national actors. Each ASEAN member state will factor in its own bilateral interests. Their assessment of their bilateral interests will be conditioned by geography and history as well as by the nature and personality of the leader in power. Policies change when leaders change.

Against this background, the two ASEAN countries that will always be the most wary of China are Vietnam and Myanmar. Both have fought wars against invading Chinese armies. The Qianlong Emperor invaded Myanmar four times between 1765 and 1769. Myanmar's defense of itself in this war led to the creation of its present-day border with China. The Burmese border also became the scene of skirmishes resulting from the civil war between Chinese nationalists and communists.

The 1979 war between China and Vietnam left more than 50,000 Vietnamese dead, although it lasted only three weeks and six days. Vietnam most likely has the greatest suspicion of Chinese interests and intentions, as it was occupied by China for more than a thousand years, from 111 BC to 938 AD.

The fates of Vietnam and China will always be joined because of geography. Bilahari Kausikan, a senior Singapore diplomat, once said: "Some years ago, I asked a senior Vietnamese official what changes meant for Vietnam's relations with China. Every Vietnamese leader, he replied, must be able to stand up to China and get along with China and if anyone thinks this cannot be done at the same time, he does not deserve to be a leader."

Thailand does not share a border with China, nor has it ever fought Chinese forces. Thai courts traditionally sent tributes to Chinese emperors, and modern Thailand has assimilated residents of Chinese descent quite comfortably. Thailand remains an American ally, but it has received a great deal of Chinese aid and is emerging as a country that is sympathetic to China's interests.

In recent years, American criticism – and indeed ostracism – of military-dominated governments has pushed Thailand closer to China. Just as Western isolation of Myanmar in the 1980s and 1990s drove Myanmar into the hands of the Chinese, Western criticism of Thailand's military

governments could result in a geopolitical gift to China.

China has also been exceptionally generous to Cambodia and Laos, and they have emerged as the two most pro-China governments within the ASEAN constellation. In maritime Southeast Asia, there is greater political as well as physical distance from China and, from time to time, greater wariness of China. However, the policies of individual countries have been inconsistent and erratic. The Philippines under President Benigno Aquino III (2010–16) was very critical of China, and took China to court in the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. However, barely two decades earlier, in 1991, the Philippines had expelled American carriers from Subic Bay and Clark Airbase.

With the election of Rodrigo Duterte as president in May 2016, tensions between China and the Philippines have subsided, as President Duterte has said that he will try to work together with China to resolve issues in the South China Sea bilaterally. Duterte followed up by visiting China in October 2016 with a delegation that included 400 businessmen. By the end of the visit, \$24 billion worth of trade deals had been signed. Soon after he returned home, China once again allowed Filipino fishermen to fish near Scarborough Shoal.

Malaysia, like Thailand, has a long history of good relations with China. In 1974, Malaysia was the

first ASEAN country to establish diplomatic relations with China; and successive prime ministers, including Mahathir bin Mohamad and the current incumbent, Najib Razak, have maintained close relations with Beijing. In November 2016, Najib visited Beijing and received many sweet deals. It agreed to build a new port in Melaka for \$1.9 billion and a new railway line between Kuala Lumpur and Kelantan for \$13.1

believed that the Chinese Communist Party had supported the PKI's attempted coup in 1965. Suharto forbade diplomatic relations until 1990.

Suharto is gone, but the wariness of China remains. The Nine-Dash Line China has drawn in the South China Sea intrudes on Indonesia's own Exclusive Economic Zone. China has given various private assurances to Indonesian leaders that it does not claim those Exclu-

traditional ASEAN consensus, to walk a middle path between deference and hostility toward China. An independent ASEAN would be best for China's long-term interests, as it would provide an independent and neutral presence that could help lubricate and soften China's relations with other major powers, especially Asian powers such as India and Japan.

ASEAN leaders, in turn, should recognize that ASEAN's neutrality is one of its greatest strengths. The United States, China, Japan and India have a common interest in ASEAN's survival and success. It has become indispensable in the Asia-Pacific region, and no other organization can replace it. It is trusted by all the great powers. As former Singaporean Ambassador to the UN Tommy Koh has said: "The US, China and India are not able to take the role of driving the region because they have no common agenda. ASEAN is able to do so precisely because the three great powers cannot agree. And we can continue to do so as long as the major powers find us neutral and independent."

Both America and China will have to display extraordinary sensitivity in dealing with ASEAN. It is an inherently weak regional organization yet, paradoxically, its weakness has been a source of strength, as it provides a neutral geopolitical platform. This will become all the more important as the competition between the US and China continues to intensify.

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billion. However, the two countries have competing claims in the South China Sea, and Malaysia's ruling elite views the country's ethnic Chinese community with suspicion. This has the potential to complicate China-Malaysia relations.

Indonesia's relations with China are complicated by several factors. With its aspirations towards becoming a middle power, Indonesia is not naturally deferential to China. Indonesia was one of the last ASEAN countries to establish diplomatic relations with Beijing, as President Muhammad Suharto

not say this publicly. There have also been incidents between Indonesian and Chinese government vessels in the South China Sea.

This brief survey of bilateral relations between China and some ASEAN states shows how complicated each relationship is. However, any calculation of ASEAN's long-term interests will arrive at the conclusion that either of the two extreme options – being deferential to China or being confrontational to China – is potentially disastrous for the ten ASEAN countries. They need to agree, by

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