

The language of regional politics



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An unmanned Vietnamese fishing boat is blown up and sunk by the Indonesian navy, according to Antara Foto, off the Natuna sea in Anambas, Kepulauan Riau province, December 5, 2014 in this photo taken by Antara Foto. REUTERS/Antara Foto/Immanuel Antoneus (INDONESIA - Tags: CRIME LAW MARITIME) ATTENTION EDITORS - FOR EDITORIAL USE ONLY. NOT FOR SALE FOR MARKETING OR ADVERTISING CAMPAIGNS. THIS IMAGE HAS BEEN SUPPLIED BY A THIRD PARTY. IT IS DISTRIBUTED, EXACTLY AS RECEIVED BY REUTERS, AS A SERVICE TO CLIENTS. MANDATORY CREDIT. INDONESIA OUT. NO COMMERCIAL OR EDITORIAL SALES IN INDONESIA

IF we begin an argument with a proposition that starts with “The problem is...”, then there is every likelihood that the thing we discuss will be seen as a problem, and indeed become a problem. The language we use when discussing matters related to politics, economics and other social issues is crucial, and it is the language that determines the object under discussion, framing it and the ways through which we can understand and address it.

This is something worth considering when we look at the state of our regional politics today. Significant developments have shaped the way in which we see Southeast Asia at the moment and it is important to note how the region itself has been portrayed in a different light by different actors, according to the language that they use to describe it.

One such example comes in the form of the speeches by the leader of China, Xi Jinping, when he discussed China's future relations with Southeast Asia and the rest of Asia in his collection of speeches, *The Governance of China* (Beijing, 2014). Xi made it clear from the outset that he wished to see the end of the "old Cold War mentality", which pit East and West against each other, and where both sides of the ideological divide viewed the other with suspicion.

In his speeches, Xi continually used the phrase "partnership" to emphasise a different approach, where China will seek new partnerships with its neighbours for the sake of joint-development in the near future. It is interesting to note that he hardly ever uses the term "ally" in his speeches, for it is equally evident that for a country to have allies also means that it has enemies to be allied against. The non-confrontational tone is set and maintained in almost all the speeches that he delivers, contained in the book, and it offers a striking view of how China's present-day elite see themselves, their country and their role in Asia's future.

Compare that to the somewhat bellicose rhetoric that has emanated from the powers-that-be in Indonesia of late. Since the controversial boat-burning policy was introduced some weeks ago, Indonesia has captured and set fire to fishing boats of neighbouring countries, ostensibly for the sake of protecting the country's maritime zone from predatory foreign incursions, and to prevent Indonesia's marine resources from being stolen by others.

While nobody in his or her right mind would doubt that Indonesia has every right to police and secure its land and sea borders, it is the language that was used to describe foreign fishermen and fishing vessels that is disturbing. Calling foreign fishermen "thieves" and "threats" immediately turns them into exactly that, both in the eyes of the general public and the state security apparatus. It immediately raises the stakes in what may well become a war of nerves between Indonesia and its neighbours, while overlooks the simple fact that cross-border illegal fishing (like cross-border smuggling, illegal migration, etc) are commonplace in the Asean region, and Indonesia is not the only country that suffers from it.

If there is ever to be a comprehensive and workable solution to these problems, it would require the combined effort of all the countries of Asean, working together, rather than against each other's interests in the matter.

For this reason, there has to be a common public discourse that allows all the nation-state actors in the region to come together to discuss these matters openly, rationally and on equal terms, without any particular nation claiming the mantle of victimhood or trying to ride the high horse.

In the same way that China's new approach to Asean adopts a language that is non-confrontational and which seems to consciously avoid the pitfall of confrontational, oppositional dialectics of the "us versus them" variety; there also has to be a return to Asean's own mode of consensus-building, where terms like "threat" and "enemy" are avoided as much as possible.

The supreme irony of the situation we find ourselves in presently is that Asean's states, which have always prided themselves on the so-called "Asean way" and which claim to have invented a different mode of government-to-government dialogue that is non-exclusive and non-confrontational, seem to have forgotten the old language of Asean diplomacy themselves.

Doubly ironic is the fact that the country that seems to have adopted that non-confrontational stance and language is China, which was once regarded as the bogeyman and immanent threat to regional security during the Cold War.

This simply shows that languages, when not used, can be discarded and forgotten. But to forget our Asean way of doing things at the present juncture of global and regional politics would not only jeopardise the future of Asean itself — with the Asean Economic Community just around the corner next year — but also remove the linguistic-discursive glue that has held the region close in the past.

For all our sakes, and the sake of the countries of the Asean region, there has to be a conscious and collective effort to return to the bargaining table and to remember our lost language of diplomacy — for it was that language of cooperation and reconciliation that helped create Asean in the first place, and has always been the language of new opportunities.

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