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The United States & China: ASEAN Among Giants

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If the intensity of US-China relations were to be plotted on a timeline of events, the graph in six months alone would probably look like the result of a rigorous cardiac stress test. Depending on what you read and when you read it, the relationship between these two Asia-Pacific heavyweights fluctuates anywhere between placid and promising to competitive and aggrieved. Sometimes, it is all of the above in the very same day.

On the one hand, US-China political ties at the highest levels look to be improving. President Obama may not have returned to Beijing since his official visit in 2009 but Chinese leaders have travelled to Washington in the last two years; President Hu in 2011 and his presumptive replacement, Vice-President Xi Jinping, earlier this year.

Xi's visit coincided with, amongst other things, a joint venture between DreamWorks Animation and China's Oriental DreamWorks. The deal, valued at \$330 million, opens up Hollywood access to a potentially lucrative Chinese market. It also paves the way for greater soft power - celluloid, in this case - diplomacy between the huge movie-making industries in the United States and China.

As ping-pong diplomacy of the 1970s showed, the potential for soft power outreach is not insignificant. Xi's visit, politically notable though it was, was also very nearly eclipsed by "LinSanity", the sudden wave of basketball fanaticism across Asia that rode on the instant stardom of Jeremy Lin and the temporary winning streak he led the faltering New York Knicks on. Other promising diplomatic initiatives are also unfolding following the 2010 US-China Consultation on People-to-People Exchange presided over by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Chinese State Councillor Liu Yandong.

However, the optimism of such developments is grounded by an alternate reality. There is a fractious backdrop of economic, financial, military, and human rights irritants in the US-China relationship. The US trade deficit with China has grown to nearly US\$300 billion this year and US complaints of currency undervaluation by China will only be amplified as the US presidential election in November nears. Suspicions within US defence and foreign policy circles about Chinese military expansion and cyber warfare capabilities remain pervasive and China's movements in the South China Sea will continue to be closely watched by the United States because of its interests and treaty obligations in Southeast Asia. This tension is compounded by the US' operational execution of its "pivot" through force rotations and expanding military ties in the region.

A mixed bag of relations is only natural for countries with formal ties to each other. However, the complexity of those ties increases (a) the closer in geographical proximity those countries are to each other, and (b) the more powerful and influential they are in the existing or emerging international order. Friction and cooperation are therefore not only inevitable between the United States and China; they are also likely to have greater implications for the group of Southeast Asian countries sandwiched between them.

How should ASEAN respond?

It is useful to remember that how ASEAN posits itself in the evolution of the US-China regional interplay will ultimately be shaped by the individual national interests of 10 very different countries. At least a third of these countries have a vital stake in the South China Sea dispute. Two have treaty alliances with the United States. A few have historical challenges with either one or both the United States and China. All have intricate and growing economic interdependence with both.

It is one thing for the United States to say that it will not push ASEAN to choose between America and China. It is a whole other thing for ASEAN to say for itself that it will not be pushed to make that decision. Thus far, there has been a dual-track approach to responding to the regional interplay involving the United States and China. As a grouping, ASEAN has done extremely well in attracting active engagement by both major powers. As individual countries, there have been marked differences in interacting with the two particularly in contentious issues such as the South China Sea.

At some point, these parallel approaches will have to converge especially if the Bali Concord III is to evolve beyond anything more than just a pledge. This does not have to happen overnight – and won't, in typical ASEAN likelihood – but the more convergent points there are in a number of different areas, the more effective ASEAN will be at responding to the dynamism of the region in a more “coordinated, cohesive, and coherent” fashion.

The natural area of convergence for the US-China-ASEAN trifecta has so far has been in trade. Given ASEAN's ambition of realising a socio-cultural community, and given expanding unconventional diplomatic initiatives involving culture, sports, and women's empowerment between the United States and China, and the United States and some ASEAN countries, this sphere should be the next natural area of convergence. Unlike trade, people-to-people initiatives yield neither tangible measurables nor results. They will not resolve the South China Sea dispute or tone down the occasional political bluster between countries. What they will do, however, is nurture relationships and partnerships for the future as well as a long-term internal code of conduct complementary to those of the documentary kind. An investment in sports, education, the arts – even big-screen movie collaborations – led by ASEAN and supported by both the United States and China will ensure pay-offs for generations to come.

If ASEAN is able to do this successfully, it will not only move one step closer towards fulfilling its people-oriented goal; it will also affirm its empowerment and stewardship of Southeast Asia. More importantly, it will contribute markedly towards reducing future flashpoints in the region and play an active role in shaping neighbourhood dynamics. To paraphrase Indonesian foreign minister, Dr. Marty Natalegawa, it will show that ASEAN is really a community in action; not only a community that is being planned for actions.