

Unleashing Asean in the world



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Despite problems among some countries in the region, Asean can be a catalyst for positive change when its citizens develop a shared sense of purpose

WHEN countries in a region act in unison, it can be so reassuring particularly when policing the region against any misdeeds.

Peer pressure can be useful, but only up to a point and if it is wielded advisedly. However, things can get difficult when the misdeeds happened a century ago.

Such was the situation when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe addressed the US Congress on Wednesday. It was roundly criticised by South Korea, China and even Taiwan for failing to account fully for Japan's war crimes in what they described as a historic opportunity for Abe to do so.

In what seemed like a Japanese production of "Mr Abe Goes To Washington", his speech seemed designed exclusively for his hosts. It expressed "repentance" but nothing more substantive, mentioning Pearl Harbour while skirting around Imperial Japan's horrors in China, Korea and elsewhere in Asia.

Titled "Toward An Alliance of Hope", Abe's speech was well calibrated: tentative yet optimistic, it sought to strengthen commitments to the US-Japan military alliance while playing on the keyword "hope" to trigger interest in the Obama administration.

Meanwhile, in the second half of the period since Imperial Japan's surrender in 1945, China's inexorable rise has exerted an economic pull on Japan and other countries. Tension has also risen lately over several disputed maritime territories involving Japan, China, Taiwan and some Asean nations.

Some of that tension is said to come from China's recent assertiveness on disputed islands. For countries like Japan, China's rise suggests several uncertainties about Beijing's future conduct and its relations with countries in the region.

Flashback three weeks before Abe's Congressional address: Singapore academic and former diplomat Kishore Mahbubani had delivered a lecture at Harvard University, noting no shortage of bad examples that the United States has set for China to follow as a superpower.

Regional analysts regard a general lack of commitment to international law as impacting on the troubling maritime disputes. Universal respect for international law is the missing ingredient in the waters of North-East and South-East Asia.

The United States had demanded, and obtained, changes in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (Unclos) a generation ago. But until today, the US Senate has refused to ratify it even after more than 160 countries including China had done so.

Meanwhile, Asean had sought to accommodate South China Sea disputes in a Code of Conduct (CoC) with China. Beijing wrestled with the prospect until a compromise Declaration of Conduct (DoC) was agreed upon as a staging post.

China's accession to a CoC remains elusive and no less essential today. But the United States has hamstrung itself in voiding any moral high ground by abdicating its responsibilities towards Unclos.

When, as in recent days, Washington preaches to China about respect for international conventions for regional security, it invites only a resounding rebuttal from Beijing. Thus, rhetoric and counter-rhetoric have replaced judicious behaviour on the high seas.

Somewhere between Kishore's speech at Harvard and Abe's in Congress, a momentous event was being played out in Kuala Lumpur: the 26th Asean Summit. Observers were anxious to see if Asean Chairman, Malaysia's statement would include references to the South China Sea disputes. A combative Philippines and to a degree Vietnam wanted a strong statement against China's claims, but a more conciliatory Brunei and Malaysia sought a more moderate tone.

The statement on Tuesday contained four paragraphs on the disputes towards the end. The tone was measured, observing that efforts at building and extending islands in disputed waters posed a risk to regional security and could undermine peace.

It was not hectoring or demeaning language intended to antagonise. Malaysia saw no need in confronting China or any other claimant country over the multi-cornered disputes.

But within hours, China's Foreign Ministry issued a response expressing "serious concern" over the statement. Still, Malaysia remained hopeful that China could be persuaded that continuing the dispute would benefit nobody.

The significance of South China Sea tensions meant that no Asean Chairman's statement of the day could ignore the matter. Neither could Asean itself as an institution.

China has long had the impression that since the disputes involve only some Asean countries, Asean as a whole has no position on it. It then assumed that Asean should have nothing to say about it.

That is an unfortunate fallacy. True, Asean as a whole cannot take any side on the disputes since most of the claimant states are within Asean, and most Asean countries are not party to the disputes.

However, that does not mean Asean can or should ignore the disputes since they impact so clearly on regional security. It cannot mean that Asean has an option to pretend that the disputes either do not exist, or they can somehow be resolved through neglect.

At the same time, countries seeking a more spirited condemnation of China's land reclamation activities forget that some of them are doing the same thing. The difference is one of scale: no country can solely be blamed for doing what some countries are doing themselves.

Thus, the statement did not name or blame any country for reclaiming land on disputed islands.

However, it also did not call for an immediate moratorium on land reclamation, which would have helped to arrest rising tensions.

In the meantime, it would not help matters to raise the stakes in any unnecessarily provocative manner.

The Philippines is reportedly banking on its security treaty arrangements with the United States to press China on its claims.

Japan itself is considering joint military patrols with US forces over maritime zones. Abe's visit to Washington has produced new defence plans that will see a more active Japanese military role in the region.

Although Japan's plans are reportedly still tentative, there is the prospect of joint US-Japanese patrols in both the East China Sea and the South China Sea. Ultimately, there could also be joint Japanese-Philippine military patrols in the South China Sea. But formal arrangements still have to be worked out on this, beginning with Philippine President Benigno Aquino's meeting with Abe in Tokyo next month.

However, regional security can best be assured only by moderate practices rather than rash or extreme measures. Asean itself has lasted for half a century, far longer than any of its predecessors in the region, because of its moderate nature.

Part of that temperate character sees Asean committed to the resolution of disputes by peaceful means as its standard operating procedure. This particular nature of Asean is also evident in the tone of its official statements.

Nonetheless, moderation is not the only important feature of Asean. No less important is its inherent sense of pragmatism.

If disputes are ever to see satisfactory resolution, that resolution is going to be effected through negotiations rather than force. And that conciliatory mode is encouraged by measured and mature approaches rather than raising the stakes and the temperature.

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