

Vigilance still the key



by Bunn Nagara

As more major powers crowd into South-East Asia, Asean countries need to develop the necessary skills to keep their territories safe and stable

SOUTH-EAST Asia still holds the promise of peace, stability and prosperity, but this familiar condition now requires an unfamiliar caution.

The sense of serenity and bounty calls for more circumspection over future regional prospects – this is also a time of likely geopolitical shifts.

Recklessness would suggest simply savouring the moment, cruising the waves of fortune with scant attention to the undercurrents.

For Asean to resolve to form a community this year may not just be a random point in history. There are good reasons why a middle-aged Asean is now set for wisdom befitting its age.

Asean countries have always had to hang together or they would hang separately. Now the fraternity has to acknowledge its familial ties for the sake of one and all.

The United States announced its “pivot” to the region with an urgency Washington felt it deserved. When that generated waves in the maritime East Asia and Pacific regions, US officials quickly renamed it “rebalancing”.

The change in terminology may be justified if it indicates a scaling down of initial ambitions. Sophisticated weaponry and vessels has had to be held back due to tighter defence budgets.

US military attention has also been diverted to West Asia, North Africa and eastern Europe. What has transpired so far in the pivot/rebalance may already be most of what can realistically be done.

The concern is not about US interests in the region, since those have long been established. The point concerns their militarist nature, with two-thirds of US military weaponry and equipment in the East Asia and Pacific theatres.

Any country making a sizeable military move would exert an impact on other countries in the region. For the sole superpower to do so may generate policy tsunamis.

US publicists may think rebranding “pivot” as “rebalancing” would dilute the contention, but that begs another question: what exactly needs rebalancing?

Popular imagination turns readily to a rising China, particularly when Beijing’s reforms cover a modernising military that includes a refurbished navy.

However, the standard US response is that the pivot/rebalance has nothing to do with China. Given the obvious link, denials only heighten scepticism throughout the region.

Japan is also modernising its military to extend its strategic reach particularly through an upgraded navy. As a US ally, Japan's plans add greater strategic weight to the US-led side.

As an indication of the scale of the effort, Japan is also tweaking its post-war "peace" Constitution to accommodate the change. Opponents of the move have emerged, not least from Japan itself.

Even at the best of times, such a move by Tokyo would raise more than eyebrows in more than a few countries. With quarrels breaking out over South China Sea territories between China and Vietnam, and between China and the Philippines, these are not the best of times.

In parts of Asia, particularly Japan's immediate neighbours Korea and China, Tokyo has yet to atone fully for its wartime military crimes. And already Japan is set to strike out on its own again in military terms.

It is no secret that the United States is encouraging Japan in its forward "collective defence" posture. Nobody is rushing to characterise it as a reaction against China, and perhaps nobody needs to – further denials may just confirm suspicions that it has plenty to do with a rising China.

India is also planning to extend its naval involvement in the region. It is unabashed about moving from the Andaman Sea to the South China Sea, even as other countries' accommodation of it is being stretched.

The Modi government's "act East" policy entrenches its predecessor's "look East" orientation. Although this covers a wide range of issues, the militarist element is quite evident.

Not satisfied with regional dominance of South Asia, India is reaching further afield and possibly overstretching into the Pacific. This is not going to calm the waves in East Asia any more than it would reassure South Asia.

China is also ruffling feathers by reclaiming and extending disputed islands. Few are saying China had started this push, since that would only confirm they are reacting to it after opting to play the same game.

Meanwhile, Beijing is hawking its prize concepts of "One Belt One Road" linking Asia with Europe, and the "Maritime Silk Road" with a focus on South-East Asia. Both should act as timely brakes on China's unilateral adventurism on the high seas.

Now Russia is also looking East, following the continuing debacle in its relations with the West after the Ukraine crisis. But how real is this reorientation and how long might it last?

A recent roundtable in Bangkok delved into these issues and encountered more questions than answers. There were also more sceptics than believers, since the mammoth task of this reformatting requires more investment than Moscow can afford.

For centuries, Russia had over-invested in its Western heritage only to find the West treating it as a second-class Occidental. The Ukraine crisis seems to have set the seal on Russia's historic U-turn.

The Russian intelligentsia is now reportedly behind efforts to rediscover Russia's Asian roots. For too long Moscow had under-invested in its Far East, where an Asian hinterland comprises two-thirds of the territory of the world's largest country.

Such efforts are a direct reaction to the repeated rebuffs and alienation of Moscow by Europe and North America. But once the enormity of the task of its Asian rediscovery dawns, Russians are more likely than not to vie for full European status again.

Politically and culturally, the European component had dominated Russia's polity. That means even socially and psychologically, ordinary Russians are unprepared for such a change.

The government itself needs to channel massive investment funds into several desolate, barren or under-populated regions to spread the vast overheads and make the projects more worthwhile. Mining and infrastructure may be key sectors to kickstart more development.

As East Asia becomes more crowded with more major powers bristling with ambitions, Asean's voice must be heard above the cacophony. And since this is the year of the Asean Community, it cannot afford to be obscured by any other player however large.

Key to the task is Asean centrality – being the centre of gravity of events and issues in East Asia. The Asean Regional Forum was an institution built on Asean centrality, and there will be more.

The alternatives are unacceptable to the interests of Asean member nations and inimical to those of the major powers.

It may be the hegemony of one major power, which would be inverting the global trend of growing multipolarity.

It may be a delicate balance of two or more major powers, which could be beyond Asean's capacity to juggle safely and productively.

Worse, the shifting (im)balances of feisty major powers may be an even greater challenge to Asean's skills and capacities.

The result of any of the above may well be Asean disparateness, dissension and disunity. It would strike at the heart of the Asean Community and all that it represents.

And if the Asean Community is critically wounded and declines in the year it is supposed to be born, it may not even recover from the trauma to survive.

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