

A New Lighthouse on the Horizon: The Emergence of ASEAN-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

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ABSTRACT

Recently, China has made a comprehensive strategic partnership (CSP) with ASEAN that would open up more opportunities for the two parties. However, some view it as another success on China's part as it now has gained influence over ASEAN. But such a view that downplays ASEAN into a mere instrument for China's plan in the region would not provide a proper view. Through the use of qualitative research methods over data gathered through the internet and documents, the article seeks to shed light over the forthcoming points. First, the article lays out the things that the CSP brings both for ASEAN-China relations and ASEAN's standing in the Indo-Pacific. Here, the partnership paves the way for stronger ties between ASEAN and China, not to mention the impact it has towards ASEAN's growing centrality. The article then proceeds with the challenges that may arise following the emergence of the partnership. On this matter, the inconsistent cohesion within ASEAN along with the ongoing competition for influence in the region can be viewed as some of the challenges. After that, a discussion over the many opportunities for enhancement is also presented. Here, the partnership would allow ASEAN to maintain its growing centrality in its many channels, one of which is its ASEAN way that guides the interactions and norm settings in the region. With all that laid out, it can be understood that the creation of the partnership does not make ASEAN lose its luster, rather it accentuates its centrality in the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: ASEAN, China, Geopolitic, Indo-Pacific, Regionalism.

A. INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND PROBLEMS

The Indo-Pacific is one of the regions that has seen a lot of developments in the past decades. Not only in terms of economic terms where it holds numerous key global economic features, it has also become a stage where some states seek to pursue their interests. The region has attracted the world's global powers like China and the US which have made their presence known there. Both of them have their own sets of interest which have been translated to a handful of initiatives of their own, take for example China's Belt and Road Initiative along with the US's Quad and AUKUS. The different set of interests, along with the backdrop of competition between the two, make it inevitable for the two to make the region another stage for their competition.

However, among the competition between the two, there also exists another regional actor in the region, that is ASEAN. The regional actor encompasses 10 Southeast Asian states, many of which hold important roles and potentials in the region, both in the scale of Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific. In the past decades, ASEAN has been closely involved in the region's development, like its creation of numerous frameworks, like ASEAN plus 3 where it works with China, Japan and South Korea. Apart from those multilateral

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frameworks, ASEAN has also shown its capacity as the norm setter in the region as apparent in its ASEAN way that imbues many engagements in the region. Such a spirit is also at work in the ways ASEAN engages with the two global powers competing nearby. In regard to the ongoing competition for influence there, ASEAN does not exclude itself from that dynamic, rather it has been actively involved in it. Its involvement is not to be seen as one where it sides with either one of the two global powers, rather it establishes itself as its own pole. Through such a posture, ASEAN is free to interact and work with either China, the US or even both of them.

With the US, ASEAN has been considered as one of US key partners in the region. The US has expanded its relations with ASEAN as seen in the creation of high-level dialogues and the US-ASEAN Summit (The White House, 2021). The same goes for China as it is ASEAN's biggest trading partner in the region. Relations between the two actors have long historical traces that contribute to its current close multisectoral ties. Recently, China has made a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) with ASEAN that would open up more opportunities for the two parties. But just like a coin, there are more than one side of it that we can interpret. Aside from the optimism surrounding the CSP and ASEAN, doubts also arise on how ASEAN is losing its relevancy and centrality as the global powers are becoming more prominent. But is that really the case?

In the past, numerous research and focus has been given towards the development of the Indo-Pacific. One of the key takeaways from the region's rapid development is the rise of one of its native regional actors, ASEAN. Despite being composed of Southeast Asian states, the regional actor has proven itself to be an important actor in not only Southeast Asia, but also the Indo-Pacific as a whole. So much so that the international community has been made aware of ASEAN's growing centrality. Research done by Hino Samuel Jose and Sigit Aris Prasetyo (2021) can be used to grasp a good picture of it. Titled "A Strategic View of Minilateralism: Indonesia, Quad, ASEAN, South Korea, Japan, and Impediment to ASEAN Centrality?", it provides a look into ASEAN's growing centrality and how it's been doing as the region has attracted numerous other global and regional powers as mentioned in the title. Instead of highlighting the pessimism over the prospect of ASEAN losing its centrality, it is noted how in such a situation, ASEAN may actually thrive. Such a view is grounded over how ASEAN has established strong ties with other regional and global powers in the region as apparent in some ASEAN forums. On top of that, a closer look into the ties and atmosphere surrounding US's bloc in the region, notably its regional partners, later shows how ASEAN can also leverage upon it.

With the input provided by past research over ASEAN's centrality, the article seeks to further the present knowledge about it through incorporating it with the ASEAN-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP). The ASEAN-China CSP is an interesting point of development between the two actors because not only the two are key actors in the Indo-Pacific but how the CSP would also allow both actors to grow through the many

opportunities provided by it. Not stopping there, given ASEAN's perceived status as the region's emerging, albeit central, actor, it is important to underline the possible speed bumps that may be present in ASEAN's path to fully get a hold of the CSP. To top it all off, the emergence of the CSP took place against the backdrop of the ongoing US and China competition for influence in the region. In the time where both sides are trying to establish themselves as the region's sphere of influence, ASEAN is present as a unique regional actor as instead of taking either side of the global power, it navigates through them. By doing so, ASEAN can reap the benefits from both sides freely. With the aforementioned considerations, the article would then move forward with its analysis.

B. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Asean Centrality and The Spirit of Regionalism

ASEAN's centrality has two dimensions, that is the internal and external dimension. In the internal dimension, ASEAN is important for its member states as it provides them numerous channels through which they can attain their national interest. A clear example is how ASEAN, through numerous initiatives, allows stable free trade between member states which is also accompanied by many opportunities for cooperation. The same also goes for issues with high political stake, take for example the South China Sea dispute. While it can't be denied that ASEAN has yet to solve the longstanding regional issue, ASEAN can't be discredited for its capacity to channel its member state, some of which also happens to claimant states in the dispute, aspiration for proper response. A notable example of it is ASEAN's attempt to create a code of conduct in the disputed waters with China (Buszynski, 2003). The goods brought about by ASEAN for its member states make it central for them as ASEAN's very composing unit. Externally, ASEAN has been actively engaging with other regional and global powers in the region. For the former, ASEAN is no stranger to productive dialogue with its regional counterparts like in ASEAN plus 3. As for the latter, ASEAN has been involved with a lot of collaborative frameworks with both China and the US with no need of taking sides. In such a case, ASEAN's centrality can be seen in how both global powers find it not beneficial to coerce ASEAN into taking sides (Chunyang, 2021). In its interaction, ASEAN has also formulated its own outlook named the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). From all that, it can be understood how ASEAN's centrality emanates not from brute power alone but rather the importance it put in by both its member states and regional powers. Therefore, it can be understood how ASEAN is central to the development of the Indo-Pacific (Yadav, 2022).

Regionalism

Explaining the definition of regionalism is a difficult matter because it can be seen as a way to promote a system of global governance, and at the same time, it has become a long-standing normative force that has transformed the world order into a much more decentralized one. (Acharya, 2018). Even so, one of the many definitions of regionalism from (Börzel & Risse (2018) explains that "a primarily state-led process of building and sustaining formal regional institutions and organizations among at least three states". This explanation shows where regionalism is becoming an increasingly important matter at this time as explained by Amitav Acharya (2007) who shows that Regions are "substantially" much more

important because of cooperation and conflict and the emergence but it also acquired "substantial" autonomy from the system-level interactions of the global powers. Another definition perspective comes from Andrew Hurrell who defines regionalism in five stages, namely *Regionalization* (social integration process), *Regional awareness and identity* (common perception of culture or interests), *Regional interstate-cooperation* (response to external challenges), *State-promoted regional integration* (regional integration), and *Regional Cohesion* (a combination of the four previous stages which makes a unified and consolidated region) (Hurrell, 1995).

One of the hallmarks of regionalism is the notion of common interests and common goals. Regional organizations, as an embodiment of regionalism, often emerge in response to a specific set of challenges or opportunities that are best addressed through collective action and decision making to foster enhanced regionalism (Farrell, 2005). For example, the European Union was founded after World War II as a means of promoting economic integration and preventing future conflicts between European countries. Likewise, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed in the 1960s to promote regional stability and economic development in Southeast Asia (Bloor, 2022). By looking at these, it can be seen that globalization plays a very important role in the notion of regionalism, especially in suppressing various regional issues or agendas that are fundamentally global in nature to be resolved at the regional level (Foqué & Steenbergen, 2005).

Research Method

The level of analysis at play in the article is the system level, specifically the regional level. In this level, the distribution of political, economic along with other forces at play there would be taken into account. The system, albeit at the regional level, would be presented in the form of analysis of ASEAN's centrality in the Indo-Pacific as it is faced with the newly formed ASEAN-China RCEP. The qualitative research method is used to better interpret the many forces at play qualitatively. The article utilizes secondary to ground its analysis. The secondary data are gathered from sources like media coverage, official publications as well as relevant studies over the issue. For the latter, related research and papers contribute to providing the present landscape of what has been and not been learned regarding the RCEP. Following that, the article seeks to highlight ASEAN's centrality which has yet to receive proper spotlight as a result of the global power competition between China and the US in the region. The article does so, later down the road, through focussing on what the RCEP has to offer, the doubts surrounding ASEAN and why ASEAN is indeed capable of maintaining its centrality in the region.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Good Neighbour's Fruit on the Menu

As part of the 30th anniversary of ASEAN-China relations, at the ASEAN-China Summit back in 2021, the two parties launched their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (Xinhua, 2021). The CSP is a product of China's good neighbour policy which aims to enhance relations with other countries or international actors, which in this case is ASEAN. Some of the CSP areas of

cooperation include the health, environment, education, trade, people to people and many more (Rotha, 2022). With the presence of the CSP, cooperations on those sectors are hoped to keep on growing and bring the parties involved closer.

This new partnership is a new stage in ASEAN-China relations. Its creation is a rational move considering the strong multisector ties between the two actors. With the background of closer and more intensive interactions, as in the case of trade that witnessed an increase from \$8 billion in 1991 to \$684,6 billion in 2020, it is no surprise that the CSP is formulated. Hence, the presence of the CSP would be a good instrument not only to accommodate strengthening economic ties in the future, but in a bigger interconnectedness as well (Ha, 2021)

Not only that, but China also announced its commitment to work together in mutually benefitting initiatives and consider ASEAN as one of its most important partners in the region. Through the many areas of cooperation covered by the CSP, there are countless initiatives or collaborations the two parties can work on. One that would not only benefit two parties but also increase the centrality of the Indo-Pacific in the world. The CSP would also allow both actors to support their respective programs, especially those that would support their bilateral ties and the Indo-Pacific as a whole. Ambitious ideas, which would require strong support emanating from both within and outside ASEAN like the ASEAN vision 2020, could be rejuvenated following the emergence of the CSP should the two actors see it in line with their regional outlook (Purwanti, 2022).

On face value, the CSP can be taken as another good development in ASEAN-China relations, but that's not always the case. Unsurprisingly, many may view the CSP as another win for China in the Indo-Pacific theatre. In this case, the CSP can be seen as another successful attempt of China to establish itself as the go-to partner in the region. Given the ongoing competition between the US and China there, it doesn't come out to be that surprising. But upon moving beyond the US-China centric perspective, it can be seen how ASEAN is deprecated through such a perspective.

Despite ASEAN's status as one of the central actors in the Indo-Pacific, they certainly still pale in comparison with a global power like China. Past case has shown how China has made itself at home in some of the world's growing powerhouse, as in the case of the African Union and their relations with China. Such conditions lead many to disregard ASEAN, the regional actor, as only a means of China's national interest in the region. While it is true that ASEAN's centrality can grow following the gains obtained from the CSP, such a gloomy view still somewhat resonates with more consideration on the inherent issues within ASEAN which may inhibit it to fully make the best use of the CSP.

The Bumpy Road Ahead

As of now, ASEAN also has its plate full of issues it needs to solve, from the Myanmar crisis to the long-lasting South China Sea dispute. Many of the problems ASEAN has have its sources on its inconsistent cohesion (Li, 2022). What is meant by that is how not all ASEAN member states have the same vision or idea to deal with certain issues. In regard to the use of

the CSP, ASEAN's inconsistent cohesion towards China could also be the source of the troubles later on.

The inconsistent cohesion within ASEAN towards high political stake issues could jeopardize the effective use of the CSP through hindering ASEAN member states commitment to it. As previously noted, China and ASEAN also find themselves on certain issues that can be felt more profoundly by certain states. Take the South China Sea dispute for example. In this dispute, some member states like the Philippines and Vietnam harbour stronger grievances towards China over the issue in comparison with other member states where some could be neutral or even lean towards China.

Considering that China is the key partner in the CSP, ASEAN member states would be required to cooperate with China in almost all fields. To garner the wanted benefit, ASEAN as a whole would need to engage productively with China consistently. However, given the grievances and the unpredicted nature of the Indo-Pacific's development, a change of view towards the CSP is still indeed a possibility to materialize later down the road. Such things could play out in the forms of uncooperative foreign policy construction by the relevant states that go against the bigger CSP framework.

Still having the same source, another way the inconsistent cohesion may affect ASEAN is through paving the way for more division among ASEAN member states. The nascent division may arise from the aforementioned dissatisfaction towards ASEAN and grievance towards China in their respective dispute. Another important source of division would be the presence of another global power, the US, in the region. To this, some states may find it to be more in line with their national interest to lean more towards the US. A resort to do so may occur as a result of the US tendency to take harsher responses on China and its capacity to perform as a regional partner.

The two conditions show how in facing high stake issues, member states dissatisfaction towards ASEAN's position in the scheme of issue might emerge. member states might feel how their interest can't be properly served in ASEAN and they might as well resort to lean towards either China or the US. Should the member states do so, it would not benefit or even harm ASEAN and the region. Such actions can take the form of unilateral approaches taken by the member states towards the issue. Take for example the Philippines' attempt to bring the South China Sea dispute with no ASEAN consensus, to the arbitral tribunal. Not only that the attempt bore no significant result as it fell into deaf ears, but it might also as well risk the bigger ASEAN-China relations over the issue's handling.

While such actions can be understood as the rational response, at least at the national level, it certainly would have a bigger repercussion, especially in regard to ASEAN. Failure to maintain the necessary commitment and consistency to the CSP, as in the case of uncooperative moves by some member states, would profoundly hinder ASEAN's ability to make the most of the CSP. On top of that, ASEAN's failure to maintain its internal cohesion (the presence of unilateral measures that endanger the bigger ASEAN relations) would

negatively affect its centrality. Should that be the case, it would show how ASEAN is not even relevant among its member states, let alone the Indo-Pacific.

Shining the Light through the Mist of Doubts

It is true that we can't deny the many problems ASEAN has in maintaining its cohesion. However, lest we amplify such issues to a point where ASEAN's growing centrality is ignored. Clashes of interest and dissatisfaction towards regional forums like ASEAN are bound to happen. At times, we can see how it leads to uncoordinated approaches that go against ASEAN's bigger idea.

But despite all that, ASEAN member states always find a way to settle their problems. Member states can resort to means like consultation and dialogue which are also in accordance with ASEAN mechanism. Here, it is important to take into consideration the regional landscape ASEAN is looming over. ASEAN member states have long historical ties dating back to its early days of inception and over time, long ties of interconnectedness have been built. Such interconnectedness is multisectoral in nature, from the economic and political sphere all the way to social and cultural spheres (Best & Christiansen, 2014). Any repercussions from unilateral actions would have a widespread effect for ASEAN as a whole. With so much at stake, it is rational for them to settle existing disagreements with other member states to prevent any major repercussions.

For the case of the CSP, despite the varying view towards China, member states know how to deal with disagreements should it arise. With that laid out, the CSP would not only avoid being the target for ASEAN member states disruption (changing views towards China) but also allow them to amass the benefits.

Moreover, to better understand ASEAN's capacity, it is important to note the changes in its chairmanship. As of 2023, Indonesia is filling ASEAN's chairman seat (Adelayanti, 2021). The start of its chairmanship has been rather bright with the addition of Timor Leste as another ASEAN member along with initiatives to focus on existing regional matters. Apart from its current role as the chairman, Indonesia has long been regarded as the *de facto* leader of ASEAN (Emmers, 2014). Indonesia is no stranger to many initiatives aimed to solve regional issues that involve ASEAN.

The presence of an opt chairman would also support ASEAN's capacity to maintain and run the CSP. To this, the chairman can better address the issue quickly and with the proper tool (ASEAN, 2021). There are two dimensions of the chairman's role in supporting ASEAN's involvement in partnerships like the CSP. In the internal dimension, the chairman is tasked with monitoring the internal dynamic and regional issues along with the necessary coordination response. The Chairman state is also no stranger in doing shuttle diplomacy or other relevant diplomacy to settle issues arising from fellow member states. As for the external one, the chairman brings ASEAN to productive dialogue with its partners, especially regarding the state of any relevant framework (like the CSP). Through doing so, ASEAN can better interact and coordinate with their partner. Eventually, disagreements or dynamics that might lead to conflict or even the breakdown of the cooperation framework.

The presence of suitable mechanisms as well as the chairman are the closest thing to a panacea to the many issues ASEAN has. This capacity to face its problems is in part important to its growing perception. As not only it is capable of working side by side with even the global power, ASEAN, as a regional actor, is also capable of dealing with either external and internal issues as well. With the absence of the latter, ASEAN would be filled with instability, incapacitating it from being the central actor it is in the region. Such conditions would only lead ASEAN to be a means for the competing global powers' ends.

ASEAN has its lion share of work to make the best use of the CSP both to gain the momentum for its growing centrality and benefitting its member states. Indeed, ASEAN is not rid of its own problems, but at the same time, it has proven to the international community that it is capable of either solving it or putting it aside so as the regional actor can perform when needed. Therefore, in the midst of the so-called power transition taking place in the Indo-Pacific between the US and China, lest we turn a blind eye on ASEAN.

D. CONCLUSION

At the end of the day, the ASEAN-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is indeed a new stage in the two actors' long-standing ties. The partnership opens up numerous doors of opportunities through which both sides can grow and collaborate to attain their ends. In regard to ASEAN centrality in the region alone, it can be seen how ASEAN has cemented itself as a key player in China's eyes. While it is true that ASEAN, despite its growing centrality in the region, has its share of issues that may hinder its capacity to fully leverage on the partnership. But at last, ASEAN has proven its capacity to endure all its dynamics. It is against this trait that it is unwise to count ASEAN out of the Indo-Pacific's development. For that, a look towards the many ASEAN mechanisms to settle the member states' differences can be pointed as the supporting factor. On top of that, the huge role and influence of the chairman of ASEAN should also be taken into account. Indonesia, which is ASEAN's 2023 chairman, has the capacity to put forward the necessary means to not only settle internal differences but to strengthen the partnership as well. As for the two global powers, the US and China, the influence and initiative they have all made in the region cannot be underestimated. Though it should be noted that many of them are all made with the involvement of ASEAN as one of the region's key actors. With the many potentials to explore in the region, the Indo-Pacific is too big to only be led by a single power. A wide seamless web of management would be needed and in the globalized era we live in, unilateral control is by no means unattainable. For that reason, it is important for any power in the region, including those who are viewing the dynamic, to keep in mind how the two global powers are not the only key player in the region. Against such a backdrop, ASEAN can still be considered as an active player in the scheme as the coachman seat is too big for one power.

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