ASEAN and the mud on the US–China strategic lens

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Immediately following the 26–29 April ASEAN Summit in Manila, many Southeast Asia-watchers were disappointed, but not altogether surprised, when the official statement omitted the 2016 UNCLOS Tribunal ruling, as well as references to 'land reclamation' and 'militarization' (which were in the draft version). It did note the operationalisation of the Guidelines for Hotline Communications for senior officials during crises as well as the application of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea in the South China Sea. The Statement also heralded the possible completion of a framework for the Code of Conduct by the middle of this year.

This recurring pattern of passive stance and false progress is all too familiar. Since 2012, when Cambodia impeded ASEAN's ability to produce a joint statement, analysts whose view of the sub-region has been limited to headlines have precipitously focused their gaze on the group's meetings and summits, scouring communiques and parsing out sentences for anything related to the South China Sea (what one analyst dubbed 'ASEANology'). And every year, those wanting to see the Association take a stronger position vis-a-vis China are disappointed (see a graded comparison of ASEAN's South China Sea statements here).

But rather than rehash the 'glass half full/half empty' debates, perhaps we should ask whether the strategic lens through which we view ASEAN is muddied or skewed. After all, that lens may be as, if not more, important than the events themselves. The 'ASEANology' trend in that regard indicates the growing prominence of a US–China lens, where any developments in the region are measured by whether they benefit one of the two major powers at the expense of the other. In other words, a US–China lens views Southeast Asia as nothing more than a battleground for Washington and Beijing in their strategic competition with each other.

China's increasingly hegemonic behaviour—whether in the South China Sea or in its recent heavy-handed approach to enforcing the One China Policy—has rapidly changed the region's strategic landscape. And America's lacklustre military and political response has perhaps further cemented the regional dynamics into an overarching US–China trajectory. But a US–China lens cannot help us grasp the nuanced regional dynamics in Southeast Asia.

For one thing, ASEAN's trajectory is too complex for a single South China Sea yardstick. There's a reason why the issue only occupies two paragraphs out of 126 in the recent Chair's Statement. Focusing on the South China Sea alone ignores the dozens of policies and programs ASEAN's been developing or aims to achieve in a wide-range of issues, from IUU fishing to infrastructure connectivity, human rights and regional economic architecture.

Further, while analysts believe that ASEAN centrality is tied to the South China Sea, regional governments put more stock in the group's ability to implement its three-pronged 'ASEAN Community' project as critical to its ability to shape the regional architecture. As a senior Singaporean diplomat said during the 2016 Shangri-La Dialogue, 'The South China Sea is only the flavour of the month—a very strong one, but not a permanent one.'

Additionally, a US–China lens subsumes Southeast Asian interests and concerns to the strategic calculus between Beijing and Washington. Put crudely, the strategic value of Southeast Asia in Washington is then measured by how and when ASEAN stands up to China in the South China Sea, while Beijing's concern is whether regional states are westernised or belong in Washington's camp—the only conceivable reason they might criticise China's policy on the South China Sea.

Needless to say, such narratives ignore regional states' interests while amplifying the strategic asymmetries between the US and China being imposed upon Southeast Asia. They could also draw other regional states into the fray. Australia's position on the South China Sea, for example, is often judged critically, including by Beijing, because it's perceived as toeing the American line. Similarly, others have criticised Indonesia's position on the South China Sea for being too soft on China at the expense of ASEAN.

This magnetic centripetal force of the US–China dynamic further obscures the domestic political considerations driving Southeast Asian leaders. In fact, one of the biggest drawbacks of a US–China lens is its assumption of the primacy of geopolitics—that states should do what their geopolitical interests require them to do. But as we've seen in recent years, domestic politics reigns supreme behind the balancing acts of Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Cambodia and Vietnam, among others, in their engagement with China and the US.

A deeper, more nuanced understanding of ASEAN and Southeast Asia is essential for regional stability in the Indo-Pacific. Adopting a US–China lens, consciously or not, will make it harder for us to contribute to that understanding as it skews our ability to view the region within its own terms and hinders our capacity to craft the appropriate strategic policies accordingly.

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[1] statement: **http://asean.org/chairmans-statement-30th-asean-summit/**
[2] draft: **https://twitter.com/EvanLaksmana/status/858495771452219392**
[3] ASEANology: **http://thediplomat.com/2016/08/why-asean-is-here-to-stay/**
[4] here: **https://twitter.com/i/web/status/858747052758622208**
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