

China and the ASEAN

- Panel:** Session 3 (Lilac & Tulip Room)
Date/Time: December 11, 2012/15:45-17:00
Speakers: Leong Mun Yoon, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (Moderator)
Huang Jing, National University of Singapore
Li Jianwei, National Institute of South China Sea Studies
Nyunt Maung Shein, Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies
Carlyle Thayer, University of New South Wales
Hoang Anh Tuan, Diplomatic Academy of Viet Nam
Rapporteur: Jonathan T. Chow, Reed College

Panel Short Summary

This panel explored the strategic role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), its member states and their increasingly complex relations with China. Dr. Leong Mun Yoon opened the panel by noting that ASEAN-China relations have improved dramatically since the Cold War—particularly during the 1990s and 2000s—as illustrated by a broad array of agreements between ASEAN and China, including the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement and China’s signing of the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. Nevertheless, territorial disputes over the South China Sea represent a test of ASEAN-China relations, and the ASEAN states’ relatively small size requires them to think creatively when dealing with major powers like China.

Dr. Huang Jing described ASEAN-China relations as heavily defined by integration and uncertainty. Both parties have benefited tremendously from deepening regional integration, which Dr. Huang described as irrevocable because it is market-driven rather than state-driven. Yet, China’s growing power has also generated uncertainty for the ASEAN states. Whereas the United States served as the main “yardstick” for Asian countries’ security and economic policies since the end of World War II, China has now become another “yardstick.” As a result, Asian countries are engaging in hedging behavior and unsure of how the regional balance of power will develop. However, Dr. Huang argued that as China

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becomes more powerful, ASEAN will find it increasingly difficult to maintain its longstanding policy of neutrality.

Dr. Li Jianwei spoke about the South China Sea dispute and suggested that China does not see the issue as a major obstacle to relations with ASEAN. ASEAN, she said, plays an important role in building confidence and defusing tension over the South China Sea. ASEAN's challenge in the dispute is to balance its own organizational solidarity with its overall relationship with China. Dr. Li concluded by emphasizing that both sides must continue dialogue and confidence-building and implementing the terms of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea.

Ambassador Nyunt Maung Sein discussed China-Myanmar relations. Located at the crossroads of China, India and ASEAN, Myanmar developed an especially close strategic partnership with China after the military government's suppression of the 1988 pro-democracy movement and the subsequent imposition of sanctions by Western countries. China is now Myanmar's largest foreign investor with some \$15 billion invested. Following the 2011 democratic reforms, though, Myanmar has sought rapprochement with the US and the EU which, the Ambassador noted, has caused China some concern, though Myanmar has also sought to allay those concerns. With respect to the South China Sea dispute, the Ambassador expressed his wish to see progress on a regional code of conduct by the time Myanmar assumes ASEAN's rotating chair in 2014.

Dr. Carlyle Thayer noted that ASEAN has been instrumental in developing the region's security and economic architecture, guided by a doctrine of "ASEAN centrality" in which ASEAN norms govern multiple regional institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN+3, and the East Asia Summit. However, ASEAN is increasingly divided over how to manage relations with China and the United States, leaving an opportunity for Great Power intrusion and the consequent undermining of ASEAN centrality. Such divisions have been manifested in deep internal disagreements over the South China Sea dispute, as well as in the competing regional structures for trade: the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership, which does not include China, and the new ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which includes China but not the US.

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Dr. Hoang Anh Tuan noted that ASEAN-China relations have changed from the “golden age” of engagement in the 1990s and early 2000s. China began to adopt a more assertive stance toward ASEAN in 2008, causing apprehension in the region. China’s desire to improve relations with ASEAN, Dr. Hoang argued, is at odds with its actions in the South China Sea, which have prompted alarm both within and outside the Asia-Pacific region. The widening power disparity between China and ASEAN necessarily causes the smaller ASEAN states concern, and China needs to take its own size into consideration.

Despite the tensions, several speakers identified possible avenues for greater cooperation between ASEAN and China, including functional cooperation in marine environmental protection and navigational safety, and the possible use of the Western Pacific Naval Symposium’s “rules of the road” as a basis for a code of conduct in the South China Sea.

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