

Nov 19 2011

How Should ASEAN Respond to the Global Leadership Vacuum?

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Over the past few years, a leadership vacuum has opened within the global community. On the surface, this absence of leadership should provide opportunities for the smaller, less powerful states of the international system to rise up and fill the gap with ideas and initiatives of their own. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) should be especially well-suited for this task. The organization was developed, in part, to allow Southeast Asia to exercise control of its local environment rather than being subject to the whims of powerful states external to the region. The weakening of the major powers should provide an extra impetus to that original goal. Moreover, to many of ASEAN's strongest defenders, the organization's greatest influence is in its role as a purveyor of regional norms.



Photo by Reuters

In fact, however, the erosion of Western leadership, combined with the failure of Asia's major powers to fill the gap, has left ASEAN in a difficult position. The organization needs strong external actors that it can play against each other in order to exercise meaningful regional influence. Left to itself, the internal divisions within ASEAN are too difficult to overcome. These weaknesses are, in part, the object of ASEAN's current efforts at institutional reform. The success of this reform is doubtful, however, and depends upon ASEAN's ability to muster regional unity in the face of external forces. That unity stands the best chance of becoming a reality if ASEAN can demonstrate its clear utility to its members, a utility that is directly tied to its ability to manage external powers. In short, ASEAN may end up caught in a vicious circle, where the weakness of external actors perpetuates weakness within ASEAN which, in turn, makes overcoming those weaknesses ever more difficult.

The events of the past decade have severely damaged the Western world's dominant role in the international system. The Iraq War undermined the moral legitimacy of American leadership; the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated the limits of American military prowess. The ongoing financial crisis began with ideas and policies aggressively promoted by the US. The United States' domestic political paralysis and associated socio-economic distress has further compromised the appeal of American leadership. Europe is locked in an economic crisis which has been greatly exacerbated by the lack of political will needed to solve the problems and an adherence to myopic economic policies that have, not surprisingly, only made things much worse. Collectively, the Western world seems to be out of ideas and incapable of effectively managing its own affairs, even as it is crippled by ideological rigidity and social dysfunction.

Even as the West falters, Asia's major powers have failed to fill the leadership vacuum. A great deal has been written about the rise of China as the next superpower. There is no question that China is one of the major economic engines of the world and that its quest for natural resources has proven extremely lucrative to countries across the globe. China's economic success and importance has thrust it into the spotlight. However, China's territorial assertiveness has unnerved many of its neighbours and its economic achievements, while impressive, cannot fully conceal the political instability and social stresses that lie just under the surface of its developmental miracle. China has given strong indications that it wants to play a regional leadership role. At the same time, however, China's leaders keep in mind the words of late leader Deng Xiaoping, who warned China to focus on its development and not try to lead the developing world before it could be certain of its own stability. Japan remains constrained by its internal and external politics and weaknesses and its inability to act independently of the United States. India is less-developed than China and unsure of its own role in the larger Asian region.

This large and growing leadership vacuum at the international level suggests that the entire world is facing an immediate future full of political and economic uncertainty and instability. But this environment may also provide other powers and actors the opportunity to offer limited leadership and increase their influence on the global stage. ASEAN has an opportunity to fill some of that space at the regional level. ASEAN was created to give its member states a regional voice. In recent years, many ASEAN specialists have argued that the organization's greatest efficacy lies in its ability to shape the norms and values that underpin state interaction in the Asia Pacific. Some advocates of this position see even powerful states, such as China, accepting the normative structures defined by ASEAN. Nonetheless, these hopes are premature. Throughout its history, ASEAN has been most effective by serving as a mediating actor between different global powers operating in the region. ASEAN's effectiveness is linked to a complex interplay of forces both within and outside of the organization.

What is holding ASEAN back? First, the organization is more divided than it seems. Many critics of ASEAN argue that its commitment to non-intervention has stunted its necessary evolution to a more coherent and effective organization. This criticism assumes a level of domestic stability within most ASEAN states that does not exist. Nonetheless, ASEAN's failure to evolve does reflect its real divisions and limitations. In the past, ASEAN has been able to obscure these divisions by focusing on its need to present a unified front when dealing with external actors. Again, this unity has never been as strong as some observers argue, but it has been enough to create an image of ASEAN as an effective regional organization. Ironically, without strong external actors to play off against each other, ASEAN is faced with the need to overcome its internal divisions, something it is probably not capable of doing. ASEAN recognizes the problem. Its effort to create an ASEAN Community by 2015, while wildly ambitious, does indicate its understanding that in a multipolar world, its ability to affect events is contingent on the appearance of unity.

Times of crisis are also times of opportunity. The current world economic crisis has the real potential to tear ASEAN apart if, at some point, it strikes Asia once again. But it also provides an opportunity for the ASEAN states to move their organization to the next level. The critical question for the ASEAN states is whether or not they see the value in creating a unified entity that can speak, with an authoritative voice, for all of Southeast Asia. Ultimately, ASEAN's ability to wield influence will depend on what the larger powers decide to do. But there is strength in numbers and leaders need followers. This means that ASEAN's ability to affect what those larger powers do is directly related to its own internal unity. How seriously its ideas are taken by the great powers depends on who and what ASEAN represents.

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