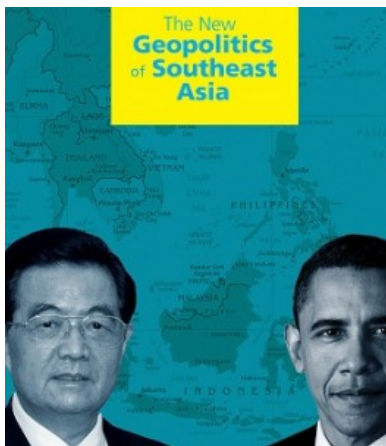


Nov 21 2012

ASEAN leaders summit meetings 18-20 November, 2012.

LSE IDEAS

By [Dr. Munir Majid](#), Visiting Senior Fellow at LSE IDEAS.



There was plenty of activity around and at the summit meetings that ended in Phnom Penh on 20 November. And plenty of excitement – over the South China Sea disputes.

At the ASEAN leaders summit, after a discussion, it was thought there was agreement, at the suggestion of the Malaysian Prime Minister, to move on. Meaning to leave the matter within the framework of the ASEAN-China officials meetings that was still working on the Declaration of Conduct, 2002 and the ever-elusive Code of Conduct. There were so many other things to discuss, particularly in the economic field.

It was reported by the chair of the meeting – Cambodia – that this was the consensus. But it was challenged by the Philippines President who said there was no such consensus as his country had reserved its sovereign right to pursue and protect its claims.

Deja Vu? Well, not quite. A 99-paragraph chairman's statement was issued. There was no communique at the foreign minister's meeting in July. There were five paragraphs on the South China Sea which placed discussion with China within the framework of the Declaration of Conduct, while mentioning in general the UN convention on the law of the sea, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (under which countries join the East Asia Summit), and the hope for peaceful conduct and relations. There was no mention of specific incidents or the Code of Conduct.

The discussions were apparently "explosive". The Cambodians felt the Filipinos were again being tiresome, with their "yes-no" and "no-yes". The Vietnamese did not say anything, letting the Filipinos make the running. And so ASEAN was shown to be disunited again on the South China Sea – although not to the extent of the previous July.

What does it mean? Victory for China? Again, not wholly. If ASEAN plays its cards right, there is at least as ASEAN-China nexus in discussions on how to handle those territorial sea disputes. There was a suggestion to have a hotline between disputants, a notion to give a suggestion of progress when there is not any. The trouble is there is no leadership in ASEAN to pursue these interminable discussions with China. It will become a bit of a merry-go-round if China shows no good faith.

The Philippines is not being petulant, not exactly. In time, and after each round of clashes with China, Beijing strengthens its position in the disputed areas. As Vietnam has observed: ASEAN talks and talks; China talks and takes. Leaving it to the officials has only worked for China, as is also felt will be the case when left to each state to deal with China on its own. Will the top leadership in ASEAN take on the matter outside the framework of summit meetings, to identify not just holding actions like hotlines and even code of conduct but also cooperative activities in the South China Sea? It has become too easy at the crowded and busy summits to avoid difficult issues that could come to haunt countries in the region.

What of the US and the pivot to the region? It has a huge dilemma. While China plays the long game, the US could hardly go for the short one, a past predisposition much criticized in the region. So President Obama flies to Myanmar to make up for lost time, goes to Thailand which also receives Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao who is treated exactly as the American President had been – in that balancing game the Thais have historically been noted for. Obama chastises Hun Sen in private for his human rights record, but the Cambodian Prime Minister takes not a blind bit of notice.

There is a considerable way to go for the US to catch up. On the South China Sea disputes, the US President in his round of meetings repeated American interest in freedom of navigation and peaceful settlement. Over incidents in the past year, he merely expressed the wish tensions will not be raised without taking sides or blaming anybody. Will this circumspect approach win the US Southeast Asian converts? Or will it embolden China? Does ASEAN see it must play a role?

The value-at-risk for the whole of the East Asian region which has half of the world's population is one third of global output – and growing.

Dr. Munir Majid is a Visiting Senior Fellow at LSE IDEAS.

This entry was posted in [Southeast Asia](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).