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STRENGTHENING ASEAN CENTRALITY IN THE REGIONAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE IN THE FACE OF MAJOR POWER COMPETITION

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Regional stability, underpinned by ASEAN centrality, is increasingly being challenged by major power competition. New Zealand needs to continue to voice its support for that centrality and further security cooperation wherever possible.

Key findings

- The Asia-Pacific strategic environment is becoming increasingly uncertain due to shifts in the distribution of power and the character of major power relations
- These shifts are posing a challenge to the ASEAN-centred regional security architecture which helps create the stability on which New Zealand depends
- New Zealand needs to show its continued support for the ASEAN-led institutions that comprise that security architecture

Executive Summary

The ASEAN centrality[1] that has been at the heart of the regional security architecture which has emerged since the end of the Cold War, is coming under increasing pressure. This pressure results from not only the perceived failure of ASEAN-led institutions to respond effectively to some of the region's security problems, but also from shifts in the distribution of power and the nature of major power relations. Whereas the major powers have hitherto supported the ASEAN-centred regional security architecture in its current form – one which is highly advantageous to New Zealand - that support can no longer be taken for granted.

New Zealand and the ASEAN states are, in many ways, like-minded. New Zealand too has a vested interest in the upkeep of ASEAN centrality and in the associated ASEAN-led regional security architecture. In view of the challenges to that centrality, and those institutions which make-up the current regional security architecture, New Zealand needs to continue to voice its support for the ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum), the ADMM-Plus (ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus) and, especially, the EAS (East Asia Summit). This should be done at every opportunity whether in bilateral meetings or multilateral fora. New Zealand should also seek to assist ASEAN wherever possible to increase the

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efficacy of these institutions and, concomitantly, to foster the practical security co-operation which some of them are tasked with.

Why does this matter to New Zealand?

In New Zealand's *Defence White Paper 2016* it was recognised that "tensions in the region [i.e. Asia] … are now greater than they were five years ago, [and] are a cause for concern." Increases in defence expenditure; changes in military posture; and a "shifting distribution of power" have led to Asia being "the focus of a complex interplay of global interests."[2] The region is, therefore, characterised by uncertainty.

Much of this uncertainty is driven by these shifts in the distribution of power as well as changes in the nature of the relationships between major powers; especially China and the United States and China and Japan. These developments have the potential to affect the security and stability of the Asia-Pacific region, particularly if they lead to major power competition, rivalry, and an intensification of the security dilemma which is beginning to prevail.

A secure and stable Asia-Pacific region is vital to New Zealand's security and prosperity and, in turn, ASEAN and an ASEAN-centred regional security architecture are seen as underpinning this security and stability. New Zealand has thus been fully supportive of the idea of ASEAN centrality in the various institutions which comprise the regional security architecture. These include the ARF, the ADMM-Plus, and the EAS; all of which New Zealand is an active participant in. In effect, ASEAN and the ASEAN-centred regional security architecture are seen as the mainstay of the rules-based regional order on which, as a small state New Zealand depends.

Major power competition and rivalry complicates the workings of that regional security architecture; threatens the existing rules-based order; and heightens divisions within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations which may imperil its cohesiveness and ability to maintain centrality. Moreover, whereas in the past all the major powers have accepted ASEAN centrality and the existing regional security architecture, now that architecture is being challenged by China and Russia who have both put forward either alternatives to it or have a preference for parts of it from which the United States, as well as New Zealand, would be excluded. In its recent White Paper *China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation* , for example, China places the EAS, ARF and ADMM-Plus at the bottom of its preferred ASEAN-centred mechanisms.[3]

What should New Zealand do?

In light of these developments, New Zealand needs to reaffirm its strong commitment to ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN-led institutions which go to make up the existing regional security architecture[4]; this is particularly so with regard to the East Asia Summit. This reaffirmation should be made in bilateral discussions with China and Russia, as well as at meetings such as the International Institute for Strategic Studies Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore and the Xiangshan Forum held in China

One of the factors leading to dissatisfaction with the existing mechanisms of the regional security architecture has been that they are seen as ineffective. New Zealand has consistently stated its belief that these mechanisms need to be made more effective, rather than new ones being established. This view should continue to be stated and to give effect to this desire New Zealand should seek ways to

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help ASEAN implement the Declaration of the EAS on Principles for Mutually Beneficial Relations, for example, as well as extend the range of practical military cooperation which occurs under the auspices of the ARF and ADMM–Plus as well with the ASEAN members themselves. This is certainly something the ASEAN members would welcome. The Blueprint for the ASEAN Political Security Community 2025 notes the desire to "promote co-operation on regional defence and security matters between ASEAN and Dialogue Partners" along with that of strengthening "substantial and strategic cooperation" and "identifying ASEAN interests and priorities with respective Dialogue Partners".[5] In New Zealand's case, this could see the furthering of the ongoing cooperation in the areas of maritime security and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, to which could be added landmine clearance, peacekeeping operations and countering Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing.

Conclusion

New Zealand is only one of ASEAN's 10 dialogue partners (the others being Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Russia, and the United States) and, as that list shows, it is very much a small state by comparison. Its ability to help maintain and strengthen ASEAN centrality in the face of major power competition can thus only be limited. As Robert Ayson contended many years ago, however, New Zealand's "reputation as a small country with a capacity to think and act independently" is an asset in the region.[6] So too its close relationships with ASEAN as well as with China and the United States. Moreover, New Zealand's diplomats and defence forces are highly regarded. Its voice will be heard, therefore, and its expertise and professionalism will be valued.

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[1] In her article in The Pacific Review, Mely Caballero-Anthony, a former Director of External Relations at the ASEAN Secretariat, defines centrality through a social network approach which shows that ASEAN's position as "the node in … [a] cluster of networks allows it to claim a central role in the region's institutional architecture". In practice, this means that in the various ASEAN-led bodies the Association not only determines their "membership and composition", but it also sets the agenda. Mely Caballero-Anthony, "Understanding ASEAN's centrality: bases and prospects in an evolving regional security architecture", The Pacific Review, Vol.27, No.4, 2014, pp.565 and 571.

[2] Ministry of Defence, Defence White Paper 2016 (Wellington: Ministry of Defence, 2016), p.10.

[3] China's preferred mechanisms are ASEAN+1 and ASEAN Plus Three. See Daljit Singh, "China's White Paper on Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region and Chinese Grand Strategy", Perspective, Issue: 2017, No.2, pp.6-7.

[4] In her contribution to ASEAN Focus, the New Zealand Ambassador to ASEAN, Stephanie Lee, observed that "New Zealand has always firmly supported ASEAN's centrality in the regional architecture." Ambassador Stephanie Lee, "ASEAN and New Zealand after the first 40 years: Supporting Centrality and Integration", in ASEAN Focus. Special Issue on ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together, January 2016, p. 22.

[5] The ASEAN Secretariat, ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2015), pp. 41 and 51.

[6] Robert Ayson, "New Zealand and East Asia's Security Future", Outlook Edition 03, April 2006, Asia New Zealand Foundation, p.08.

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