

South Asia Analysis Group

Published on *South Asia Analysis Group* (<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org>)

[Home](#) > South China Sea and ASEAN Chairmanship

South China Sea and ASEAN Chairmanship

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Mon, 01/06/2014 - 10:43

Paper No. 5630

Dated 06-Jan-2014

By Dr. Subhash Kapila

Introductory Observations

South China Sea disputes involve five ASEAN nations whose sovereignty in different portions of this strategic sea region stand contested by China adopting a mixed strategy of political coercion, military brinkmanship and use of force to occupy its claimed islands and landforms.

Vietnam and the Philippines as ASEAN nations in closest proximity to China have been victims of Chinese aggression in the South China Sea.

The Chairmanship of ASEAN in relation to South China Sea was never a subject of regional or international scrutiny until 2012 when Cambodia as Chairman of ASEAN for that year caved-in to China's pressure not to permit the issue of the Joint Communiqué which contained references to the South China Sea not entirely favourable to China.

It was the first time in ASEAN's history that a Joint Communiqué issue was scuttled by an ASEAN Chairman Nation under pressure from a non-ASEAN nation.

Myanmar has taken over the Chairmanship of ASEAN for the year 2014 and concerns exist whether Myanmar given its close linkages to China in the past may be brought under similar coercive pressures by China not to give prominence to China's not too positive formulations on the South China Sea disputes discussion at ASEAN Meets in 2014.

Myanmar's Chairmanship of ASEAN: Politically and Strategically Significant for Wider International Recognition

Myanmar allowed its chance to pass to become Chairman of ASEAN in 2006 as it was still under Western sanctions and it was feared that Western nations may not have attended connected meets. The question of adequate infrastructure to host over 300 meetings ASEAN major meetings may also have been a major consideration

In 2014 Myanmar has a new Capital City begun six years ago to host ASEAN meets. More significantly, Western nations have significantly removed a wide range of sanctions and the United States is involved in evolving strategic relationship to draw Myanmar away from China. Well publicised is the cancellation of major Chinese projects thereby loosening major Myanmar linkages with China.

Myanmar's assumption of ASEAN Chairmanship in 2014 would be a striking opportunity for Myanmar to demonstrate its credentials to be fully integrated into regional and international discourse and management of prestigious international events. All this would add to Myanmar's political image.

In strategic terms also Myanmar would be able carve a niche for itself especially when the East Asia Summit to be held in Myanmar is to be attended by the world's major powers. Myanmar figures in the strategic calculus of each of the major powers for different reasons.

Myanmar's past cannot be held against it. Every other nation is beset with internal political problems. What is more important is that Myanmar has advanced and overcome many of them.

In the same spirit of determination now that the South China Sea conflict escalation by China stands internationalised, the international community would be politically and strategically size-up Myanmar as to how effectively Myanmar handles and manages China during its Chairmanship of ASEAN.

Myanmar's Foremost Challenge as ASEAN Chairman for 2014: Maintaining the Centrality of ASEAN and SEAN Unity

Myanmar's foremost challenge would be to maintain the centrality of ASEAN and its unity in the face of severe pressures from its erstwhile benefactor, namely China. This stood mauled badly in 2012 under the ASEAN Chairmanship of Cambodia.

The above aspect was also emphasised in October 2013 by outgoing ASEAN Chairman, the Sultan of Brunei as he handed the ASEAN Gavel to the President of Myanmar.

Myanmar's President highlighted seven points that would receive priority focus during his charge. Besides the oft repeated issues like climate change, disaster management, transnational crime, food and energy security etc., Myanmar's greatest challenge would be to ensure

that China during Myanmar's charge is not tempted to transgress on ASEAN security in the South China Sea nor does Myanmar cave-in to Chinese pressures on that issue.

Myanmar would be expected by its fellow ASEAN nations that it steers the course of events in a manner that China becomes motivated for accommodation of ASEAN sensitivities on issues of DOC and COC and accepts multilateral negotiations.

Myanmar needs to remember that in the heyday of Western sanctions the ASEAN nations stood by Myanmar and prevented its complete isolation by USA and the West. Vietnam is said to have also been instrumental in United States recent political reachout to Myanmar. Myanmar needs to repay that debt to ASEAN nations by ensuring that during its charge China is not allowed to repeat the Cambodian episode.

China's main strategy pursuance of its aggressive claims on the whole of South China Sea is to demolish the centrality of ASEAN and ASEAN unity. Interestingly, it emerges that the existing DOC is between China and some of the ASEAN nations. The DOC needs renegotiating as between ASEAN as the regional organisation and China. China seemingly resists this idea.

On China's application of pressures on Myanmar, it was heartening to read the assessment of an organisation like Human Rights Watch whose Deputy Director Phil Robertson opined: "If Beijing tries to overplay its hand and push the Myanmar Government too hard on ASEAN matters, it is likely that Myanmar will push back. Myanmar will likely not repeat the Cambodian mistake.....other governments are still angry with Hun Sen and the Cambodians for the fact that their actions dragged ASEAN down in the eyes of the international community. Myanmar will not risk such an embarrassment during its watch."

Myanmar is expected to justify this trust and confidence reposed in it.

Concluding Observations

ASEAN is at critical crossroads in its history as its collective unity and centrality stand corroded by China in the pursuit of its territorial aggrandizement in the South China Sea at the expense of its smaller ASEAN nations like Vietnam and the Philippines.

China has sought to affect a cleavage within ASEAN between claimant states and non-claimant states in relation to the South China Sea. ASEAN should stand united and firm and make it known to China that the South China Sea is an ASEAN issue and any conflict resolution processes China would have to engage ASEAN as a whole.

Myanmar too as Chairman of ASEAN for 2014 is also at critical crossroads in that if the ASEAN Community is to be achieved by 2015 then ASEAN under Myanmar's Chairmanship has to firmly and unitedly steer ASEAN keeping the core issues of ASEAN centrality and ASEAN unity as the foremost priorities, China notwithstanding.

Tags:

[ASEAN](#) [1]

[Myanmar](#) [2]

[South China Sea](#) [3]

[china](#) [4]

Category:

[Papers](#) [5]

Countries:

[China](#) [6]

Topics:

[Strategic Affairs & Security](#) [7]

[Political](#) [8]

Copyright ©2012. All Rights are Reserved.

```
(adsbygoogle = window.adsbygoogle || []).push({ google_ad_client: "ca-pub-2275491169696384", enable_page_level_ads: true });
```

Source URL: <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/1437>

Links

[1] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/366>

[2] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/170>

[3] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/329>

[4] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/6>

[5] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers>

[6] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/china>

[7] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/strategic-affairs-and-security>

[8] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/political>