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[Home](#) > ASEAN Geopolitical Centrality in South East Asia 2020 Hinges on Dispensing Neutrality on China

ASEAN Geopolitical Centrality in South East Asia 2020 Hinges on Dispensing Neutrality on China

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By Dr Subhash Kapila

“Perceptions” generated by visible foreign policy attitudinal inclinations count more than “Intentions” in foreign policy dynamics of Nations or Regional Organisations, ASEAN representing South East Asia, stands close to losing its credibility with its apparent neutrality or divided responses on China’s aggression in South China Sea.

South East Asia geostrategically located at the junction of the Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean and with many ASEAN Nations with land borders or maritime borders contiguous to China cannot escape the ‘tyranny of its geostrategic location’.

In 2020, the pretentious ‘Superpower Ambitions’ of China collide with those of United States led Western Alliance and Indo Pacific QUAD nations alarmed at China’s growing naval predatory moves in South China Sea, Indian Ocean and extending to Eastern Mediterranean.

In 2020, ASEAN Group as a regional organisation and South East Asian Nations individually need to face the stark reality that what stands between China’s hegemonic designs of converting its South East Asian ‘Soft Underbelly’ into China strategic backyard is the United States led Indo Pacific QUAD & Western Nations alarmed at the threatening directions in which China is moving.

In 2020, ASEAN is at a 'Crucial Inflexion Point' where ASEAN has to dispense with its neutrality or long antiquated 'non-alignment' on China's power-play in the region or face the prospects of its geopolitical extinction as a substantive regional grouping and its 'geopolitical centrality' in global strategic calculations.

Let it be stated forcefully also that contextually ASEAN should not count on election of United States President-elect Joe Biden that United States would soften its stances on checkmating China's power-play in South East Asia or lessen United States confronting China in South China Sea or on Taiwan. United States national security interest demand continuity and ASEAN would not be presented with 'softer choices'.

ASEAN was long spared the crucial dilemma of choosing sides between United States and its Indo Pacific Allies and Strategic Partners on one side opposing the threatening military expansionism of Communist China until South China Sea disputes erupted more visibly in the middle of the last decade with China's forcible military occupation of island territories of Vietnam and the Philippines.

But in 2020, when China's 'Disruptive Strategies' no longer confined to military aggression, brinkmanship and coercion against its less powerful ASEAN neighbours but transcending into wider geopolitical spaces, ASEAN stands at 'crucial crossroads' where it has to firmly decide as to on which side ASEAN stands geopolitically--- an 'Expansionist China' or the Free World represented by Indo Pacific QUAD & Western Nations making a belated checkmating of China's military expansionism.

ASEAN as the regional organisation of South East Asia nations representing the combined interests of the region acquired credibility over the decades and 'Centrality' in South East Asian foreign policy calculations in global capitals and particularly in India which was regionally contiguous to it. That 'Centrality' stands danger of being devalued should ASEAN persist in not offering a united front against Chinese aggression in South China Sea.

Hopefully, Vietnam as currently in the 'Chair' of ASEAN and having been subjected to repeated Chinese military aggression on its Northern Borders and more threateningly in the South China Sea can motivate and steer ASEAN to united responses against Chinese military expansionism.

ASEAN's centrality stood maintained for decades all along even when Communist China with historical record of 'Disruptionist Strategies' in preceding decades made an intrusive entry in ASEAN mechanisms on the strength of its change of tack to exercise of "Soft Power" diplomacy in South East Asia.

At that point in time, perceptually, ASEAN went out of its way to integrate Communist China in its various ASEAN forums fondly hoping that Communist China with softened contours may now wish itself to be co-opted and accepted in regional organisations like AESAN along with global forums.

So far so good as long as Communist China adhered to its “Soft Power” policy approaches, even though its long range intentions in the region were still suspect. China’s switch to ‘Hard Power’ strategies under Chinese President Xi Jinping have irretrievably changed the Indo Pacific strategic landscape into a highly turbulent one where multiple ‘explosive flash-points; stand germinated’.

With multiple China-generated flashpoints dotting the Indo Pacific and which carry inherent dangers of unintended ignition due to misleading and with the United States no longer to offer China accommodative stances dangers of limited wars acquiring wider dimensions in the Indo Pacific cannot be ruled out.

In the eventualities envisaged above ASEAN Nations whether they like it or not can be will-nilly be drawn and be impacted by outbreak of such armed conflicts. What would be more prudent for ASEAN?

India which is an active proponent of ‘ASEAN Centrality’ in its Look East & Act East Policies needs to ‘re-visit’ its strategic calculations after having rightly chosen to be an active member of the US-led Indo Pacific QUAD Initiative. Can India afford dichotomies in its South East Asian policies?

Concluding, when historical evidence of South East Asian security is surveyed and security choices and patterns in South East Asia post-Communist China emergence in power in 1949 are analysed what comes to the fore is that South East Asia has had to resort to external countervailing power of the United States and Western Powers to protect its security and stability. China does not offer that option to ASEAN.

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[ASEAN](#) ^[1]

[china](#) ^[2]

Category:

[Papers](#) ^[3]

Countries:

SEAsia [4]

China [5]

Topics:

Strategic Affairs & Security [6]

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

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

[4] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/se-asia>

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

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