

How to destroy community or is ASEAN still relevant?



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In Chinese numerology eight is considered as an extremely lucky number. The Petronas Twin Towers in Malaysia each have 88 floors, many eights can be found in menu prices in restaurants, telephone and licence plates with those digits sell in ten thousands of dollars, even the opening ceremony of the Summer Olympics in Beijing began on 8/8/08 at 8 seconds and 8 minutes past 8 pm local time (and the time difference between UTC was eight hours as well). In Mandarin the word for "eight" sounds similar to "prosper" or "wealth" and the word "double joy" looks like two eights standing next to each other (囍). The more such digits, the better for everyone.

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According to this belief it should be natural to be optimistic about everything connected with the Association of Southeast Nations (ASEAN), formed on 8/8/67. 2015 brings its 48th year of work devoted, as it has been stated many times officially, to sustainable development and stability of the region. However last few years have been really tough for the organisation and its core values seem to change within time.

Hollow regionalism

If ASEAN was a single entity, it might become 7th largest economy in the world. However it has to represent interests of its ten members who sometimes speak different voices. On March 25, Chinese information agency Xinhua reported that Cambodia Prime Minister Hun Sen had reiterated that the South China Sea dispute is an issue between claimant states and China, not between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China.

Two weeks prior to this event Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei reprimanded the Vietnamese head of ASEAN for a series of allegedly biased and false remarks on South China Sea disputes. Chinese side emphasized the incompatibility of Le Luong Minh as Secretary General

of the organisation. From Beijing point of view, as well as Phnom Penh's ASEAN should stay neutral on the SE China Sea issue and do its best not to damage association's image as a whole.

Considering extreme difficulties in unified EU approach towards Ukraine crisis and Russian annexation of Crimea, it's obvious that large international community can reach a dead point towards issues important to its borders, bounding treaties and neighbouring countries. The same thing is happening now in SE China Sea with rows on its archipelagos and negative stance of Beijing towards international law. China casts a shadow on four out of ten ASEAN claimants in the SE China Sea who actually have disputes with it: Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. Chinese nine-dash line map which sometimes overlaps more within the established borders serves as a weapon of mass deconstruction of ASEAN integrity.

After 48 years it's even harder to establish a common denominator for each ASEAN member. SE China Sea is the most important for keeping the integrity of whole group unchanged, and in the past issues regarding the region were able to embarrass the community. In 2012 ASEAN failed for the first

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time in its 45-year history to issue a joint communiqué due to disagreements over the disputable sea. Two months before the formal nationalization of three Senkaku (or Diaoyu in Mandarin) islands by the Japanese government, a moment which triggered the wave of anti-Chinese protests which later turned from bilateral (involving only Japanese and Chinese citizens) to multilateral problems. Although Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands are not an ASEAN issue, they paved the way to a SE Asia melting pot of territorial claims and rows.

Soul searching

Among the problems that ASEAN has to deal with are strong leadership, efforts on centralisation and cohesion of the group and codifying their claims in domestic legislation as well as in multilateral frameworks. Former Secretary General of the organisation Surin Pitsuwan used to put it in even more harsh words advising the grouping to do some "soul searching" to obtain more cohesion. Since 2013 ASEAN is under leadership of Vietnamese Le Luong Minh and in times of highest tension arising over disputed territories (like Spratlys and Paracels) between Beijing and Hanoi his tenure might be taken provocative towards China from ASEAN as a whole.

No wonder leading ASEAN experts have begun to question the relevance of the regional organization, bemoaning its lack of resolve before China's repeated acts of provocation against ASEAN members, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam. Gunboat diplomacy as it is frequently said about China's policy towards neighbouring countries on the SE China Sea is a major challenge for US. Despite its efforts to pressure Washington's closest allies not to join the latest development of Chinese financial revolution, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), its official roster includes all 10 members of ASEAN. Only the Philippines maintained different status as a prospective founding member of the bank. It means that Manila is still in the non-binding stage without any commitments and that this *wait and see* approach is needed for the clarity on AIIB's procedures. From the end of June 2015 when China finalized the AIIB's Articles of Agreement helping undecided members to decide for or against joining the members list, the Philippines was ready to 10-day military exercises conducted with US. This year, as a clear message to any hostile entity, the number of soldiers was doubled as a sign of expanding military partnership between Manila and Washington. Wargames named „Balikatan” (*Shoulder-to-Shoulder*) were also a deter-

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rent for rising Chinese claims to Paracels Islands.

Security

ASEAN has a chance to promote its security to higher level and in the same time remains in a very difficult position towards US. As a closest economic and military ally Washington supports partners from SE Asia, but still has to remember to keep the strategic *pivot to Asia* policy as a way to improve relationship with China. For ASEAN members the upcoming presidential election in US in which Hillary Clinton, former secretary of State and well known first lady might take the seat after President Obama. Mrs. Clinton experienced high popularity in China in the 1990s and was even referred cordially as Hillary after many years spent by the side of her husband, than President Bill Clinton. Her second journey through the world of politics as a secretary of State from 2009 to 2013 made her coin her signature *Asia rebalance* strategy, and for Chinese become a symbol of Washington moves to counter and isolate China in the region.

ASEAN needs to strengthen its ties with as many partners from abroad as possible. Alliance with US can withstand much but it

should not be tested with every, even small diplomatic quarrel happening all the time with China. Nations from SE Asia can now fully count on the chances of Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with European Union. Latest 132nd General Assembly of Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU-132) held in Hanoi has been praised for its cohesion, diversity and profound approach towards strengthening economic ties between the nations. During the IPU-132 delegations from 166 countries adopted the Agenda for Sustainable Development and Designing Goals for post 2015. With the assembly held in Hanoi and the ASEAN chairman position Vietnam feels responsible for further implementation common policy in the Asia-Pacific region. Every news on the latest developments from the country like fighting for human rights, working for better security standards and rebalancing from China-oriented to US-centered policy shows strong desire for changes and commitment of Vietnamese leaders.

Towards EU

Vietnam negotiates its own FTAs with EU, which was clearly visible during the annual Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) held in Milan last October. Hanoi as one of two ASEAN governments who have not yet

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established diplomatic relations with the Holy See (the other one is Brunei), conducts regular bilateral meetings with delegates from Vatican and works on establishing such connection. Negotiations on the ASEAN-EU FTAs have been launched in 2007 and they still are under consultation. European Union in 2014 appointed a special ambassador accredited to the ASEAN who can help accelerating the EU membership of East Asia Summit (EAS) as a "strategic partner". The forum which consist now of 18 members discusses security and development issues in Asia-Pacific region. ASEAN opens to taking EU into consideration as a possible part of annual meetings after many years of lukewarm and hostile approach.

Partnership between EU and ASEAN dates back to early 1970s when the EU then as the European Economic Community become the first formal dialogue partner for ASEAN. In 2014 foreign ministers of both organisations agreed to upgrade the relationship to a strategic partnership, 20th ministerial meeting was also held. Europe has allocated more than 5 billion EUR to Asia between 2007-2013, areas of bilateral cooperation cover all most important challenges which correspond with needs of SE Asia nations. The EU has confirmed its

commitment to the region for the 2014-2020 period, which amounts to a significant increase of support by more than 20% compared to the preceding financial period, the indicative geographical amount under the Development Cooperation Instrument will be EUR 6429 million for the region. Europe aims in modern technologies as well. *Horizon 2020* is the EU flagship programme for Research and Technological Development. With an overall budget of EUR 80 billion (2014-2020) the programme aims at boosting knowledge-driven economies through research and innovation and promises new breakthroughs, discoveries and world-firsts by taking great ideas. For ASEAN the EU counted in 2012 for 13,1% of total trade. This puts the EU on rank three after China and Japan but outperforming the fourth placed US.

Latest summit

Unfortunately for ASEAN the latest, 26th summit held in Malaysia did not bring any breakthrough and common stance regarding the SSE China Sea. The chairman's statement has been adopted and there was no repeat from 2012 Cambodia exception mentioned before, however neither the Langkawi Declaration on the Global Movement of Moderates nor the Declara-

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tion on Institutionalizing the Resilience of ASEAN and its Communities and People to Disasters and Climate Change can bring the community together in front of rising China's will to govern the region. Analysis made by Japanese authorities published during the summit shows that without US Asia-Pacific region will be dominated by Chinese economy within just 20 years. Aspirations held by Beijing cannot be considered harmless, and the public opinion should not believe in statements of Chinese Foreign Affairs Ministry about the securing the *status quo* on the sea with utmost care and attention to the rights of neighbouring countries. Among the analytics working on Asia-Pacific issues there is a common belief that China does not want to start another war because it would devastate its economic position and the drive to become supporter of the whole world in all kinds of goods. Maybe it is so, but nevertheless without waging war countries can be bullied by Beijing one by one and brought to the line where the international law should be considered as a weapon against China.

ASEAN's summit produced few declarations and a willingness to unify common time zone for all 10 countries. Instead of current four different time zones, members would adjust their time to a single agreed

one, most probably the current time zone in Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore, that is GMT + 8, similar to the one in China. It should be the only common denominator between ASEAN and Beijing. Others should be kept aside defending the right of the community to say "no" to every display of hostile intentions shown by China.

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CSM is an independent, non-government analytical centre established in 1996 and dealing with Polish foreign policy and the most important issues of international politics. CSM is active in research, education and publishing, organises conferences and meetings, and participates in international projects in collaboration with similar institutions in many countries. CSM creates a forum for debate and exchange of ideas in matters of international politics, relations between states and challenges in the global world. CSM's activities are addressed above all to local-government officials and to entrepreneurs, as well as to officials of the central administration, politicians, diplomats, political scientists and the media. In 2009, CSM was recognised as one of the best think-tanks in East-Central Europe in the study "The Leading Public Policy Research Organisations in the World" conducted by the University of Pennsylvania.

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