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MARITIME SECURITY: TIME FOR ASEAN TO REACH BEYOND LOW HANGING FRUIT

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During its year as Asean chair Singapore has continued the associations work in developing measures to help mitigate tensions in the South China Sea.

In recent years communications hotlines between respective foreign ministries have been introduced and the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) introduced. CUES is intended to reduce incidents between the navies (and eventually the coast guards) of littoral states.

A framework for a Code of Conduct (COC) was agreed in May 2017 □ an incredible 25 years after the need for one was first acknowledged. The implementation of its predecessor (the 2002 Declaration of Conduct) continues to be discussed.

In February 2018 China agreed to start negotiating details of the COC with Asean. Difficulty in establishing verification and enforcement mechanisms among the parties means there is no clarity on whether the outcome document will be legally binding as originally envisioned.

Asean caught in the middle

One shortcoming of any COC is that it is limited to China and Asean. The South China Sea issue has evolved from a question in the 1990s of managing territorial and maritime disputes between Asean states and China, into a broader geostrategic contest between China and the United States, with Asean caught in the middle.

China has little incentive to allow its behaviour to be constrained by agreements to which the United States, or any other major power that operates in the South China Sea, is not similarly obliged to adhere to. Its current willingness to commit to COC negotiations with Asean is likely motivated by a desire to undercut further involvement by the United States.

Under US President Donald Trump, the US has increased and upgraded its freedom of navigation (Fon) operations in the disputed areas.

The indications that Taiwan □ with the independence-inclined Democratic Progressive Party (DPD) in control □ may re-emerge as a flashpoint in US □□□□□□□ relations enhances the strategic value of the surrounding seas.

Asean is not oblivious to these new challenges. A number of constructive proposals remain on its multilateral cooperation agenda.

CUES was expanded last year to include all members of the Asean Defence Ministers Meeting Plus

(ADMM-Plus), a forum that consists of Asean countries defence ministers and their counterparts from Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia and the United States.

Since 2013 ADMM-Plus has actively conducted multilateral maritime exercises that largely focus on non-traditional security challenges, such as terrorism.

Singapore Minister for Defence, Ng Eng Hen, was instrumental in the signing last week of the worlds first multilateral air guidelines aimed at preventing skirmishes between military aircraft over the sea.

Termed Game Guidelines for Air Military Encounters reports earlier this week said that the eight Plus members of the ADMM are currently considering whether they will sign up to Game, as they did to Cues last year.

Meanwhile, on October 22 the the maritime field training component of the inaugural Asean maritime exercise got underway following a tabletop component in August.

China first raised the concept of such an exercise at an informal meeting of Chinese and Asean defence officials in 2015. Joint maritime exercises between Asean and the United States are also being discussed.

Asean-China military ties

Several Asean states already participate in exchanges or joint drills with China, including the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and the navies of Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore.

Asean now faces far more serious challenges in maintaining a central role in securing its own maritime spaces. Beijing has been offering itself to its neighbours in a new role, as a provider of regional public goods, including maritime security. This is logical given Chinas legitimate interests in this area as a state with long coasts that face the South China Sea.

But strategic distrust continues to get in the way of Southeast Asias receptivity. China has yet to successfully persuade other states that it will play by international rules and conventions. This mistrust was exacerbated by Chinas rejection of the 2016 arbitral award in a case filed by the Philippines.

Extra-regional states are realigning to try to balance Chinas growing influence and capability. The revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the United States, Japan, Australia, and India) and the US construction of an Indo-Pacific strategy that links the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea and East China Sea are predictable consequences of Chinas rapid progress in military modernisation and its growing foreign policy assertiveness.

If Asean is to mitigate the territorial and maritime tensions in the South China Sea and avoid being overrun by Chinese domination and again becoming an arena of great-power armed confrontation, it has to more convincingly demonstrate that it remains a backbone of security multilateralism.

Asean must prove that its cooperative security approach remains viable even under (or especially under) the evolving geopolitical environment. Confidence-building measures are no longer enough, nor are they bound to be effective in achieving their self-explanatory goal.

It may be time for Asean to go beyond confidence-building measures and reach much higher than

its customary preference for low-hanging fruit.

As the most inclusive and productive platform thus far the ADMM-Plus may be the best option for Asean in obtaining what it needs

However, to ensure a strong ADMM-Plus Asean member states must develop Asean itself, either through the ADMM or minus X arrangements, into an autonomous and cohesive bloc that is a constant advocate and activist for regional maritime security.

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