
THAILAND FACES TOUGH JOB AS ASEAN CHAIR

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As Asean chair this year, Thailand must enhance the regions cooperation amid growing US-China tensions that threaten to go beyond mere trade conflicts, international-relations experts said at a peace forum in Bangkok yesterday.

The tension between China and the US is unlike the tension between the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, said Yan Xuetong, chief of the Institute of International Relations at Tsinghua University. He is also secretary-general of the World Peace Forum in Beijing.

Yan was speaking at a forum titled An Uneasy Peace: China in a Divided World, where he addressed the changing geopolitical dynamic between China and the US, and what that entails for Asean.

Instead of focusing on military accumulation, ideological conflicts and nuclear threats, competition between the superpowers China and the US will be in the realms of economics and technology, Yan said, calling the rivalry an era of uneasy peace.

The economic dispute between the two countries is only one aspect of the conflict and will be followed by technological tensions, he added, citing the recent arrest of Huawei's CFO, Meng Wanzhou, in Canada.

Thanks to President Donald Trump's America First foreign policy, the US has been playing a smaller role in international politics, retreating from regions such as Asean. However, China lacks the capacity to take the United States place in international politics, which now leaves Asean members with the manoeuvring ground to take charge of their regions management, Yan said.

The international relations expert agreed that Asean has been presented with an important opportunity to drive forward the cohesive integration of the region during the apparent geopolitical power vacuum.

Yan further suggested that while Trump's inward-looking foreign policy has led to a general decline in multilateral relations around the world, the Asean region is an exception. Multilateral negotiations such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) are still promising, he said.

Other participants agreed that there was a window for Asean multilateral cooperation to grow.

For this reason, Thailand's position as Asean chair is extremely important, as it will set in motion the necessary diplomatic and trade initiatives to cope with the changing world order, said Kavi Chongkittavorn, senior fellow of the Institute of Security and International Studies (ISIS) Thailand, and former chief editor at Myanmar Times.

One of Thailand's most ambitious goals as the chair is to conclude the RCEP negotiations, which has been going on for seven years.

If successful, RCEP will be the largest multilateral trade deal in history, between the 10 Asean member countries and China, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

The key challenge for Thailand in negotiating the RCEP agreement will be to bind together China and India, the two superpowers that have conflicting interests, Kavi added.

Completing the RCEP is not just significant for Thai trade, but it is also symbolic of Thailand's commitment to push forward the notion of Asean Centrality, he said later in an interview on the sidelines of the forum.

According to the Department of Trade Negotiations, the US-China trade war has made Thailand and other countries in the region determined to conclude the mega-trade pact negotiations by the end of this year.

Kavi believes that even though the negotiations have been dragging on for the past seven years, RCEP will finally be concluded in 2019 under the current external pressures.

Our handling of the RCEP will say whether Asean is still relevant in the geopolitical field as a region. It will also improve Thailand's image internationally for being able to reconcile opposing interests of various superpowers into a single mega-trade pact, he said.

However, Yan has a more sobering view of the RCEP negotiations.

Due to the sheer size of the deal and the conflicting interest of the economic powerhouses involved, the chances of concluding RCEP by the end of this year are slim, as are other regional negotiations that will be set in place, he said.

However, Thailand must keep the dialogue on issues such as RCEP on the table during its chairmanship to ensure that the region remains as one entity and that cooperation in the region continues to progress gradually.

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