In Focus
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Southeast Asia and the Return of Power Politics

ASEAN was formed in the cold war period when the world was divided between competing communist and capitalist systems. The “ASEAN way” of seeking development, harmony and agreement has allowed it to prosper and expand its international influence to co-opt interested powers into its various cooperative and dialogue frameworks. Since around 2010, however, this has been challenged by the return of power politics to the Southeast Asian region. Lowell Dittmer, professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley in USA, gave a talk at EAI on this resurgence of power politics, with analysis on the status of relations among ASEAN, China, Japan and the United States.

Professor Dittmer posits that power politics is premised on nationalism, security and power. Its revival is therefore accompanied with the surge of domestic nationalism, bigger security budgets and demand for power in China, the United States and Japan. The revival of power politics was first manifested in China’s belated attempt to enforce its maritime claims in the South China Sea, followed by the United States’ 2017 withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership in favour of bilateral trade agreements and tariffs. Thence, great powers started to ignore multilateral organisations and resorted to dealing with regional countries bilaterally. This challenges the multilateral principles that ASEAN pursues. At the same time, ASEAN has been unable to find consensus to respond effectively to such a challenge.

Looking at this issue through regional and global power structures, Professor Dittmer conceptualises that there are two triangular relationships in the region. One is the regional triangle formed by ASEAN, China and Japan. The other is an international triangle formed by ASEAN, China and the United States. The regional triangle is more geographically bounded and relies more on soft power and economic statecraft. The international triangle, on the other hand, is the arena for power politics.

In both the regional and international triangles, ASEAN is in a pivot position, enjoying good relations with the other two sides of each triangle. This is the strongest position in the triangle whereby ASEAN can benefit from competitive suitors. Professor Dittmer therefore sees that ASEAN is in a position to absorb the “rise of China” while retaining a tenuous autonomy and benefitting the attention of two rival power players.

Nevertheless, as ASEAN seeks to avoid making a choice and play pivot, there are risks involved. Though enjoying a strong position, ASEAN is a relatively weak pivot that is unable to provide carrots to keep suitors in line. Weak pivots will risk provoking the two other sides of the triangle, as evidenced by the cases of Ukraine and Taiwan.

The other two sides of the triangle—China and the United States—have their own power-political ambitions and are currently embroiled in an inimical trade war, which necessitates a cautious balance by ASEAN. The impact of the trade war is expected to drag down both China and the United States, with China suffering relatively greater loss because it is economically more vulnerable. If China can hold its population in line, it may prevail. If the trade war escalates and economic decoupling follows, it could recreate a Cold War divide between two self-sufficient economic blocs. This would force ASEAN to make tough choices.