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South China Sea issue divides Asean

By Jeremy Grant, Ben Bland and Gwen Robinson



Philippines officials at the disputed Scarborough Shoal

For an organisation that chose “One Community, One Destiny” as the banner for its latest summit, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) could not have imagined a more embarrassing outcome.

The summit, attended by the foreign ministers of the 10-member bloc, was to have ended last week with an endorsement of its position on a range of regional issues, most of all on the highly-charged issue of

conflicting claims with China to territory in the South China Sea, which has become Asia’s biggest potential military flashpoint.

Yet when it came to it there was no final communiqué – for the first time in Asean’s 45-year history.

As chair of the summit, Cambodia refused to allow the Philippines, supported by Vietnam, to include in a communiqué language that referred to a recent stand-off between its naval vessels and Chinese government ships over the Scarborough Shoal, a reef claimed by both countries. Cambodia insisted that such disputes were bilateral, which is Chinese policy on the issue.

China claims sovereignty over almost the entire South China Sea, which is believed to contain large oil and gas deposits and straddles key shipping lanes. The area is also claimed in whole or in part by Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam – all Asean members – and Taiwan.

The outcome was “a disaster” for Asean, said Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at National University of Singapore.

“This is clearly a warning signal to Asean that a new geopolitical struggle is breaking out between the US and China in south-east Asia,” he said.

“Quite naturally, Asean countries are being pulled in different directions. Asean has to work twice as hard to ensure that this new geopolitical contest doesn’t split the grouping.”

That dynamic can be traced to China's increasing assertiveness over disputed territorial waters and the recent declaration of a "pivot" towards Asia by the US.

Thitinan Pongsudhirak, political science professor at Chulalongkorn University, said China's posture is "much more assertive and less hedged" as it tries to avoid appearing weak ahead of a key leadership transition this year.

"China knows that its pressure on, and clout over, certain Asean members would prevent a key common Asean position. China thus wins the day on bilateral preferences for the time being," he said.

As for Cambodia's willingness to tuck with China, diplomats noted that Phnom Penh received 10 times more in foreign investment pledges from China than from the US last year.

"What we've seen with this summit is that clearly Cambodia was looking after China's interest in the South China Sea," said Ian Storey, senior fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore.

At the same time the US has been flexing its diplomatic muscle. Days before the summit in Phnom Penh, US secretary of state Hillary Clinton – on a visit to the Cambodian capital – warned China that its approach to solving territorial disputes was a recipe for "confrontation".

"The pivot means certain Asean members can rely on the new US posture to hedge and leverage vis a vis China. Current internal Asean rifts are attributable not just to China's assertive rise but also the US's vigorous re-engagement," said Mr Pongsudhirak.

However, David Carden, appointed last year as the first ever US ambassador to Asean, said that the failure to issue a joint communiqué was actually an "encouraging" sign that the bloc, long lamented for failing to confront divisive issues, was becoming a stronger forum for debate.

"We think of it as a maturing of Asean that it is prepared to discuss and take on these difficult questions [like the South China Sea]," he told journalists in Jakarta.

"Asean's conversation on these issues is deepening and I think that's cause for not only praise for what they're doing but also cause for hope that they're going to be able to resolve these issues over time."

One senior Asian diplomat in the region cautioned against seeing the disagreement as a permanent split.

"You can hardly say it was a successful meeting. Asean could not reach a consensus on a matter of critical importance," said the diplomat.

"Asean is strong as long as it's united – Asean's centrality was therefore damaged. But we shouldn't be too pessimistic. Asean is an amorphous entity, not like the EU."

- Manila will examine the circumstances that led a Chinese naval vessel to run aground in the South

China Sea near the Philippines before filing any diplomatic protest against a possible incursion, a spokesman for President Benigno Aquino said yesterday, **writes Roel Lamingin in Manila**. The Chinese vessel is now heading back to China.

“As of now, there is no plan to file a diplomatic protest,” said Edwin Lacierda, the spokesman. “We will first investigate.”

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