

Meltdown for Asean over South China Sea
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By Our Correspondent

Indonesian diplomats scurry across region attempting to put the pieces back together

The combination of aggressive Chinese jawboning and Filipino pride are combining to create a diplomatic crisis in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations that Indonesia is trying desperately to untangle.

The squabble has sent Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa, who previously called the Phnom Penh deadlock “perplexing” and “very, very disappointing,” flying on a diplomatic mission across the region to attempt to find support for a common position on the South China Sea issue.

Senior diplomats and political figures involved with Asean are growing increasingly concerned that the 10-member alliance has become polarized, with the Philippines and Vietnam squaring off against China and Cambodia essentially doing Beijing’s bidding. Political insiders in Kuala Lumpur say Malaysia has quietly tilted towards Beijing.

The failure of Asean's foreign ministers last weekend to issue a joint communique for the first time in the alliance’s 45-year history is the clearest sign of the fissure. The ministers spent hours reviewing a broad agenda ranging from economic cooperation and integration and political and security alignment as well as the crucial issue of hegemony over the South China Sea.

Cambodia, which hosted the meeting, rejected any reference to the South China Sea in the planned conference declaration, causing the cancelation and drawing criticism that the bloc was divided and under China’s influence. China has claimed jurisdiction of the entire body of water almost up to the shores of the littoral nations. The sea is rich in marine life and the bed is believed to be rich in hydrocarbons and straddles strategic shipping lanes vital to global trade. Asean members Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam, as well as Taiwan, also have claims in the waters.

“The failure or inability by Asean to reach a common position is potentially disruptive, and it cannot and should not be allowed to prevail for long,” Natalegawa told reporters. Increasingly it has fallen to Indonesia, whose diplomats have earned growing respect as the most accomplished in the region, to try to put out such brushfires.

After the failure come up with a communique, the Philippines accused Cambodia, the bloc's 2012 chair, of doing Beijing's bidding, a rare public rebuke in the consensus-driven Asean, which has managed to persevere through a long series of diplomatic crises to present a common voice.

Privately, a senior Indonesian diplomat acknowledged to Asia Sentinel that Cambodia was carrying China's agenda as a result of the impoverished Phnom Penh’s close economic ties to Beijing but he cautioned that the aggressive Philippine stance is potentially more worrying.

"Manila thinks the Americans are backing them because of their enhanced defense ties but that's a mistake," said the diplomat. "The Americans are as concerned about this as we are."

The Philippines and China have been involved in a weeks-long face-off over ownership of the Scarborough Shoals, known to the Chinese as Huangyan Islands and to the Filipinos as Panacot Shoal. The islet specks lie 198 km west of Subic Bay on Luzon Island and are claimed by the Philippines as a part of Zambales Province. Some 55 km in circumference, the islets have been the scene of a tense standoff between Chinese and Philippine naval ships since April and are the biggest test so far of China's claim over the entire sea.

At the Asean meeting in Cambodia, Albert del Rosario, the Philippines' foreign secretary, broke protocol by denouncing what he called Chinese duplicity and intimidation, saying that "If Philippine sovereignty and jurisdiction can be denigrated by a powerful country through pressure, duplicity, intimidation and the threat of the use of force, the international community should be concerned about the behavior."

While US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stressed that "Asean needs to speak with one voice" on issues surrounding the South China Sea the next day and joined Del Rosario in urging Asean to take a common stand on the Scarborough dispute and on other Chinese incursions in the area, the US is said to be increasingly concerned that the Philippines is going off the reservation in the belief that the US Seventh Fleet will be there to provide backup for its wholly inadequate navy, whose most potent warship is a converted, decades-old US Coast Guard vessel.

"The Filipinos are basically off the reservation, pretending that the US is backing them up," said a Jakarta source. "From what I hear, the Americans are concerned about the Filipinos and didn't put them up to this posturing."

With Asean looking at a 2015 deadline for the establishment of closer economic integration and several other items on the group's agenda, the missing communique has the diplomatic crowd deeply worried. Among other things, the meeting last week also failed to take up a contentious but potentially groundbreaking Asean human rights declaration.

Speaking at the launch of the new Strategic Review journal in Jakarta, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said yesterday that the South China Sea issue needs to get back on track.

"This (failure to issue a communique) has never happened since Asean was established. I am disappointed and really concerned, this could lead to misperceptions or false representation of Asean. The media has said Asean has broken apart and there was no longer unity in the region, Yudhoyono said. "I disagree. Asean has not broken up and it remains in unity in spite of the ongoing problems that need to be resolved."

Asean and China need a code of conduct for the South China Sea to avoid conflict and bolster stability in the region, Yudhoyono told the forum Tuesday.

Yudhoyono said at Tuesday's forum, attended by former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, former East Timor President Jose Ramos Horta and Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, that countries in the region needed to help the claimants manage their disputes and keep temperature low.

"A meaningful and practicable code of conduct in the South China Sea is central to improving confidence building. It will help enhance predictability and bolster regional stability in a region that desperately needs it," he said.

Yudhoyono said there would be no quick resolution to competing territorial claims in the South China Sea, warning that tensions must not be allowed to escalate.

"It is safe to assume, given the extreme complexity of the overlapping claims, that we will not see a diplomatic resolution of the South China Sea disputes in the short term, perhaps even in the medium term," he said.

"Short of a comprehensive resolution, the claimants must do their best to manage and contain the disputes to make sure they do not escalate or worse lead to the outbreak of military clashes."

It is not the first time Yudhoyono has expressed exasperation over the issue. "Things do not necessarily have to be this slow," he told Asean foreign ministers meeting in Bali in July last year for the 44th Asean Foreign Ministers meeting.

"We need to send a strong signal to the world that the future of the South China Sea is a predictable, manageable and optimistic one."

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