

After China's 19th Party Congress – implications for the regional architecture and order by Shawn Ho and Benjamin Ho

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President Xi Jinping has consolidated his power after the recent 19th Party Congress in China. How will China's behavior on the international stage change during Xi's second term and what does China's continued rise mean for the regional architecture and order? Will China seek to gradually "ignore" ASEAN centrality as it seeks to create a more Sino-centric regional order based on Chinese characteristics?

China's vision of Regional Order – Pursuing the status quo?

China has benefitted immensely from the current regional order, which remains a US-led one not just in security terms but also in economic terms. Since the end of World War II, the US alliances in the region have created a stable external environment, which has allowed China to focus on economic development. Given the immense benefits China has gained from this US-led regional order – globalization, accession to the WTO, and free trade – China appears to be in no hurry to create an alternative Sino-centric regional order yet.

During Xi's first term, China certainly played a greater leadership role in the region. It has created several China-led initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This is likely just the beginning of the next phase in China's development in which more China-led initiatives will be unveiled on the global stage. However, these initiatives are still at the point where they play a complementary rather than supplementary role to US-led institutions and regional order. China is under no illusions that it is ready now to take over the US' leadership role in international and global affairs. This reluctance to play an outright international leadership role is understandable given China's priority in the foreseeable future is to deal with the multitude of domestic problems.

Looking ahead, given its continued rise and newfound wealth, China will continue to use economic diplomacy as the foundation of its foreign policy. One of the main reasons why countries seem to be increasingly tilting towards China is because of their economic pull and the fact that China possesses resources that no other country can match. As greater clarity emerges regarding the function, role, and benefits of Chinese initiatives such as the AIIB and BRI, it is likely that even more countries will jump onto the Chinese bandwagon. How China

treats its partners in the coming years will determine and shape the perception that these countries have of a China that will continue to rise for the rest of this century.

Given the upcoming summit meeting between President Xi Jinping and President Donald Trump, immense global attention will be given to President Xi's words and actions. How will he elucidate China's vision and views for the region in this first China-US summit after the 19th Party Congress? Does ASEAN still have a role to play in China's thinking of the regional architecture and order?

China-centricity meets ASEAN centrality

This is where China, despite it being a global power, needs the ASEAN voice on its side if its international influence is to be perceived positively. For one, its territorial disputes in the South China Sea with ASEAN claimant states continue to feature in regional forums and discussions. This can be seen in the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore where without fail one or two plenary discussions would revolve around the topic. This suggests that despite the best efforts by Chinese leaders and diplomats to skirt the issue or to frame it as a non-problem, ASEAN member states are crystal clear about the reality of the disputes and are likely to use them as a barometer to gauge the atmosphere of their ties with Beijing.

Second, given China's relatively late entry into the international community, many of the existing rules and patterns of global governance have been established. Nevertheless, recent years have seen growing Chinese dissatisfaction with existing global norms and a desire to modify them to better account for the perceived transition in global power and the national interests of non-Western players (of which China identifies itself as one). The larger question is whether a Chinese-influenced global order would be sufficiently broad to incorporate the interests and concerns of other countries, or, whether such a global order is primarily to serve and advance Beijing's own national interests. To be certain, top Chinese leaders, particularly President Xi, have been extremely vocal of late in espousing concepts such as the "new type of major power relations" (新型大国关系) and "community of common destiny" (人类命运共同体) as a uniquely Chinese approach to articulating how international relations ought to be structured. Yet, many scholars and senior policy makers outside of China remain unconvinced. As one long-time observer of Chinese politics in a neighboring country puts it, "we have to see what China does, not what it says."

As such, one might surmise that how China relates with ASEAN will be a litmus test of its long-term intentions and whether its leaders are able to creatively pursue China's interests and to avoid "the tragedy of great power politics," which is the inevitable clash between great powers, as political scientist John Mearsheimer sees it. To do so, Beijing needs to

acknowledge – begrudgingly or otherwise – that an ASEAN-led regional security architecture is at present preferred to one in which China sets the rules and determines the agenda.

Indeed, ASEAN's 50 years of community building and diplomacy has proffered the region a certain level of credibility and institutional integrity, notwithstanding the intramural problems that continue to exist among its members. Whether this will continue to be so will be dependent on how Southeast Asian leaders view the association and the extent to which their countries' national interests are commensurate with ASEAN's. If China is to improve its image in the region, it can do no better than letting ASEAN take the lead on regional matters; any perceived attempt to run the show will be contrary to Beijing's long-term interests.

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