



Asia Pacific Bulletin

EastWestCenter.org/APB

Number 238 | October 31, 2013

China-ASEAN Relations: Consensus on Principles, Differences on Specifics

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Chaobing Qiu, Research Fellow at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), explains that “The consensus on principles such as mutual trust, cooperation and mutual respect is highly valued by both sides, but is still not enough to resolve the specific differences concerning disputes in the South China Sea.”

ASEAN, for China, is the focal point for Chinese diplomacy with Southeast Asian countries. Beyond ASEAN, China’s overall relations with Russia, Central Asia and most South Asian countries are relatively stable. It is, however, China’s bilateral relationships with some individual ASEAN countries, and Japan, that have experienced problems for almost three years because of differences over historical issues and territorial disputes. Differences of opinion have also surfaced between China and the United States over these issues. Indeed, China’s political influence with some of its ASEAN and Northeast Asian neighbors has diminished over the past three years, even as its trade and economic ties with many countries in Asia continue to grow.

Chinese policymakers are aware that China’s peaceful development requires a peaceful and stable regional environment, especially along China’s eastern and southern coastline. Chinese policymakers are also aware of the fact that it will be more difficult for China to break the stalemate with Japan than to advance relations with ASEAN countries. Therefore, China’s new diplomatic goal is to improve relations with ASEAN as a key to creating a more peaceful and stable regional environment. This proposal was outlined by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang when he attended the East Asia Summit (EAS) in Brunei earlier this month.

Premier Li hosted the 16th ASEAN-China Summit on October 9 on the sidelines of the EAS where he put forward a number of proposals to deepen the ASEAN-China relationship over the next ten years. He outlined his vision for the China-ASEAN relationship when he explained that “First, the fundamental issue for promoting cooperation lies in deepening strategic trust and exploring good-neighborly friendship. Second, the key to deepening cooperation is to focus on economic development and to expand mutual benefit and win-win outcomes.” His seven-point proposal consists of a treaty of good-neighborliness and friendly cooperation between China and ASEAN countries, strengthening security exchanges and cooperation, upgrading the China-ASEAN FTA, developing intra-ASEAN connectivity infrastructure, enhancing financial cooperation through a new China-ASEAN bank, promoting maritime cooperation, and deepening people-to-people and cultural exchanges within the fields of science, technology and environmental protection. From a Chinese perspective, Li’s proposal clearly embodies China’s willingness and openness to enhance strategic mutual trust with ASEAN and to deepen regional cooperation.

Out of the seven proposals Li put forward, the one that garnered most attention was about strategic trust, a treaty of “good-neighborliness and friendly cooperation between China and ASEAN countries.” The issue of political or strategic trust is always mentioned when world leaders meet, but it is extremely difficult to develop strategic trust when parties are involved in a dispute. Trust can only be formulated through long-

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term confidence building measures and mutually beneficial interactions. The good intentions of one side should be accepted and acknowledged by the other party, and specific cooperation mechanisms created that encourage verifiable and visible progress. Premier Li’s proposals have been welcomed in principle by ASEAN countries, but the specific differences, even disputes, between China and some ASEAN countries—namely Vietnam and the Philippines—may negatively impact this Chinese proposal.

There is no denying the fact that the largest barrier between China and some ASEAN members is a dispute over islands in the South China Sea. The Chinese government position is very clear. It insists that this dispute should be resolved through dialogue and negotiation among relevant countries and that no other third party should be involved in complicating the dispute. There is a perception however in China that the United States has become involved as a third party and is actively supporting countries—Vietnam and the Philippines—against China. The United States repeatedly iterates its interest in the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, but as Premier Li clearly stated at the ASEAN-China Summit “the territorial disputes in the South China Sea have not affected international shipping lanes.” In the minds of some Chinese, this issue of freedom of navigation is nothing but high-sounding rhetoric from the United States to interfere with China-ASEAN relations.

The Chinese government has repeatedly presented historical evidence for its claim of sovereignty over the disputed South China Sea islands, but other countries choose to completely ignore these historical facts and try to justify their claims simply using international law. Acknowledging that the Chairman’s Statement of the 23rd ASEAN Summit reaffirmed that the dispute in the South China Sea should be resolved “by peaceful means in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,” it is also important that historical factors be taken into consideration. Clearly there is a large gap between China and some ASEAN countries regarding consensus on principles and differences on specific issues. The consensus on principles such as mutual trust, cooperation and mutual respect is highly valued by both sides, but is still not enough to resolve the specific differences concerning disputes in the South China Sea. This issue will continue to be a problem for China and some Southeast Asian states.

Accepting that there are challenges ahead for the China-ASEAN relationship, this proposal outlined by Li may be the most feasible way for China and ASEAN to formulate a closer rapport. If both parties can successfully negotiate and sign a treaty of good-neighborliness and friendly cooperation, then distrust between them could potentially be greatly reduced leading to a more institutionalized relationship. The objective of this proposal is to create a more trustful and inclusive China-ASEAN relationship. Deeper maritime, security, economic and trade cooperation, as well as increased cultural and people-to-people exchanges, along with better disaster management, are all included. This initiative, however, goes even deeper.

In contrast to other proposals put forward by the Chinese government to other states and that are more focused on common interests, this offer is also highlighting shared Asian historical values that both China and its ASEAN neighbors have in common. Common interests can loosely bind different countries, but shared values can bind them tighter. So in order to enhance greater understanding between China and ASEAN countries, China needs to make a greater effort to highlight the shared values that all parties have in common. This will entail being more creative in rule-making and regional institution-building that will lead to increased mutual trust.

In summary, China and ASEAN countries should not just keep their consensus solely at the rhetorical or principle level—a spirit of cooperation and mutual trust must be tangibly applied to the settlement of specific disputes. Through the creation of more ambitious initiatives, China can further promote shared development through shared values with its ASEAN neighbors.

The *Asia Pacific Bulletin* (APB) series is produced by the East-West Center in Washington.

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APB Series Coordinator: Damien Tomkins

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