

SOUTHEAST ASIA IN 2017: Grappling with Uncertainty

Joseph Chinyong Liow

The year 2017 was a significant one for Southeast Asia in many ways. It was a milestone year, marking the fiftieth anniversary of ASEAN. Formed in the cauldron of the Cold War in August 1967, ASEAN has been credited with playing an instrumental role in fostering stability and security in the Southeast Asian region over the last five decades. Expressing this celebratory mood, the ASEAN calendar for the year was predictably inundated with events to commemorate the formation of the regional organization. In terms of economics, the countries of the region continued to grow at commendable rates, buoyed in no small part by increased domestic consumption and Chinese and Japanese investments.

Yet, the celebratory atmosphere could barely conceal the uncertainties and host of challenges that confront the region, and which manifested themselves in 2017. Foremost, at the geostrategic and geoeconomic level, was the election into office in the United States of Donald Trump, who, based on his campaign rhetoric, seemed to desire a fundamental overhaul of America's role in global affairs. On the other hand, China appeared to be relentlessly expanding its economic clout and influence in the region, with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) leading the way. Meanwhile, under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan appears to have awakened from its slumber and has both deepened and accelerated its own engagement of the region. Together with several other major challenges, such as humanitarian crises in Myanmar and Marawi, these developments not only made for an exacting year but also reflect the increasing complexity that has come to characterize the regional strategic and economic landscape and suggest potential challenges that need to be overcome in the years ahead.

JOSEPH CHINYONG LIOW is Dean and Professor of Comparative and International Politics at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Navigating Major Power Politics

The inauguration of the mercurial Donald Trump into the White House on 20 January ushered in something of a new era in regional affairs. A product of popular dissatisfaction among the American electorate, the Trump administration cast doubt over America's continued leadership of global affairs with its "America First" approach to international diplomacy. For the region, the early portents of change were not encouraging. One of Donald Trump's first acts as president was to withdraw the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which was painstakingly negotiated by his predecessor, Barack Obama. The TPP was significant not only because of its potential to be a major driver of regional trade and prosperity but, equally important, it served as a crucial expression of American commitment to the region. That America's withdrawal from the TPP was not followed up with any concrete effort to explore alternative avenues for American participation in regional free trade arrangements occasioned further consternation. Indeed, there was little indication that the United States under Trump was interested in either American leadership or free trade. It was striking, for instance, that in a speech that otherwise had hit all the right notes, Secretary of Defence James Mattis's address at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2017 made no mention of American leadership. Moreover, the desire of the Trump administration to fundamentally recalibrate American participation in regional trade was also made abundantly clear on the occasion of the president's participation in the APEC Summit in Da Nang in November, when he railed against trade practices that disadvantaged Americans and reiterated his "America First" agenda.¹ Concomitantly, he was pleased to stand on the sidelines as the remaining eleven signatories of the TPP agreed to pursue a revised iteration of the agreement, to be known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). In view of his presence in Da Nang, however, APEC members were prepared to accommodate the views of the Trump administration. This led to the incorporation of "Trumpisque" language into the Da Nang Declaration through references to the "importance of non-discriminatory, reciprocal and mutually advantageous trade and investment frameworks", "unfair trade practices" and "unfair trade subsidies".² Additionally, members of the CPTPP also continued to hold out the prospect of America's future participation. This was clear when they expressed the hope that the United States would join in the revised agreement should it eventually come to pass.

Notwithstanding the uncertainties regarding the foreign policy trajectory and priorities of the United States under President Trump, especially on trade, Southeast Asia's relations with the United States did still manage to make

headway on other counts. In an effort to assuage regional concerns, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson hosted his ASEAN counterparts in Washington DC on 4 May. During the exchange, Tillerson reiterated President Trump's promise to meet his Southeast Asian counterparts at the end of the year at the various ASEAN and APEC summits (a promise which he made good on) and established the point that the Asia-Pacific remains a top U.S. policy priority for the new administration. On their part, the meeting also offered regional foreign ministers an opportunity to obtain a first-hand view of the newly developing (at the time) Trump foreign policy, amidst headlines dominated by sabre-rattling on the Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea. Economic partnerships through the U.S.–ASEAN Connect, the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement, and the ASEAN Connectivity through Trade and Investment programmes were also discussed.³ Prior to the Washington meeting, Vice-President Mike Pence's visit to Jakarta in April put Southeast Asia on the White House's agenda. During the trip, Vice-President Pence visited Southeast Asia's largest mosque, Istiqlal, where he also made the symbolic gesture of praising Indonesia's form of "moderate Islam", doubtless to dampen fears about President Trump's perceived harsh rhetoric towards Islam. Moreover, it was reported that \$8 billion worth of energy deals were signed during the Pence visit, despite talk of the president's intention to renegotiate trade deals with Indonesia. While in Jakarta, Pence also met the ASEAN Secretary-General, Le Luong Minh, and reiterated President Trump's commitment to visit the region in November for the East Asia Summit, the U.S.–ASEAN Summit (both in the Philippines), and the APEC Summit (in Vietnam).

Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc was the first Southeast Asian leader to visit Washington, when he was hosted in the White House in May. Visits by Prime Ministers Najib Razak, Prayuth Chan-ocha, and Lee Hsien Loong followed over the course of the year. Concomitantly, President Trump's visit to the region for APEC, the U.S.–ASEAN Summit, and the East Asia Summit went some distance in calming regional anxieties of American neglect. At the same time, the unpredictability that has come to characterize the White House has also precipitated a recalibration of regional relations with other external powers. Not surprisingly, relations with China featured prominently, as did progress in engagement with Japan and India.

Southeast Asia featured prominently in Beijing's efforts to further regional economic development, trade and integration with its BRI. To that end, Southeast Asian governments were strongly represented in the BRI Summit hosted by President Xi Jinping in May, although not all regional states were represented at the level of heads of government. China's partnership with several Southeast Asian

countries under the rubric of BRI, particularly Malaysia and Indonesia but also Laos and Cambodia, deepened considerably over the past year. Cambodia was the beneficiary of a slew of agreements in 2017 alone, involving the construction of hydropower facilities, a new airport, and several major road projects, all bearing the imprimatur of BRI.⁴ Meanwhile, bilateral discussions took place between China and Singapore on the latter's role and contribution to BRI projects in terms of funding and technical expertise.

The expansion of China's interests and presence in the region via BRI-linked projects was, however, not without problems and criticism. Local environmental groups in Cambodia and Laos have expressed concerns over the large-scale hydroprojects spearheaded by Chinese state-owned enterprises, while Prime Minister Najib Razak has had to fend off accusations that he was "selling" Malaysian interests to China. Indeed, China's BRI is arguably potentially most extensive in Malaysia, where it is supporting a variety of port projects, but also a highly-visible, ergo publicly significant, US\$12.8 billion East Coast Rail Link from Port Klang through Kuantan to Pengkalan Kubor at the tip of the Thai border with Peninsular Malaysia. Both countries have further committed to spending a combined US\$50 billion on BRI infrastructure projects over the next ten years. Opponents have criticized the lack of transparency and oversight of such large projects, yet it also points to the enormous clout China has in Malaysia that they can lead such strategically important projects.⁵ Meanwhile, China's extensive interests in hydropower projects has also created diplomatic problems among Southeast Asian states, with Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam vehemently protesting the expansion of the Laotian hydropower programme on grounds of its potential adverse effect on the flow of the Mekong river.

On the diplomatic and security front, China and ASEAN made progress on a "framework" for a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. The two-page document was agreed at the meeting of the foreign ministers of ASEAN and China in August. Following the adoption of the "framework" at the 20th ASEAN-China Summit later in November, the leaders agreed to begin negotiations on the Code of Conduct. While optimists see the "framework" as a step towards the holy grail of a legally binding Code of Conduct, it should be noted that the document itself provided no such guarantees.⁶ Furthermore, consensus on the "framework" barely veiled the continual challenge that the South China Sea presents for ASEAN unity, and this has come to be expressed in the all-too-familiar internal debates over the contents of statements that follow the conclusion of ASEAN meetings. By that token, criticisms of how ASEAN statements did or did not address the South China Sea issue under Manila's chairmanship in 2017 was notable given

the fact that the Philippines is not only one of the claimant states but, more to the point, was the beneficiary of a major international tribunal decision on the South China Sea which ruled in its favour (against China) in July 2016 on a case brought before it by the previous administration under Benigno Aquino III.⁷ Having seen ties with the Philippines improve under the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte, China has now turned its attention to Singapore, ASEAN Chair for 2018, and efforts — both oblique and direct — have been made to influence how the ethnic Chinese-majority island-state might shepherd regional discussions on the South China Sea during the course of its chairmanship.⁸

Under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan has been making a strong play for influence in Southeast Asia as well. Japan has already signed strategic partnerships with key Southeast Asian states such as Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia, which tie economic partnerships with maritime security. As the region fretted over the impending inauguration of Donald Trump in January, Prime Minister Abe made a highly significant trip to Southeast Asia that included stops in the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia (and Australia) in January. In the Philippines he pledged to provide 1 trillion yen (US\$8.7 billion) in aid and investments to the Philippines over five years for the purpose of improving the country's infrastructure.⁹ This followed on from the US\$1.85 billion of Japanese investment pledged to President Duterte — mostly to develop the automotive industry in the Philippines — on the occasion of his October 2016 trip to Tokyo.¹⁰ In addition, Japan has also pledged to support efforts to improve the defence capabilities of the Philippine Armed Forces. Doubtless with concern over increasing Chinese assertiveness in mind, both leaders also released a joint statement that established their mutual interest in freedom of navigation and the application of international law (via UNCLOS) in the South China Sea. Maritime security featured prominently in Abe's stops in Hanoi and Jakarta as well, as the Japanese prime minister offered to enhance mutual cooperation towards the objective of improving the maritime security capabilities of both states. In Indonesia, President Joko Widodo reiterated an earlier invitation (first made in October 2016) to Japan for it to work on the Jakarta–Surabaya rail project.¹¹ Abe's visit to Southeast Asia was reciprocated by the visits of several regional leaders to Japan. These included a visit by his Vietnamese counterpart, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, in June that resulted in the signing of several cooperation frameworks to provide for technical assistance and commercial ventures, and by Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia in August, when he sought US\$800 million in infrastructure investments, including a sky train project.¹²

Relations with India have in recent years received a boost from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's efforts at making stronger inroads into ASEAN. Against

this backdrop it is notable that between Prime Minister Modi, President Pranab Mukherjee and Vice-President Hamid Ansari, Indian leaders have visited all ten ASEAN members, even as India and ASEAN celebrated five years of strategic partnership in 2017. Substantial progress was also made on the bilateral front. In November, a visit by the Defence Minister of Singapore resulted in the conclusion of a new naval agreement aimed at boosting maritime security cooperation, an arena where the Indian Navy has gradually been playing a more active role in recent years. Apart from furthering India's efforts to interact more with Southeast Asian states in the maritime security domain, at the bilateral level this agreement completes the trifecta of defence engagement which began with the 2007 Air Force Bilateral Agreement and 2008 Army Bilateral Agreement. Several months earlier, in July, India announced the provision of financial assistance amounting to \$500,000 to the Philippines, to aid Manila in its fight against Islamic State-affiliated terror groups in the troubled Mindanao province.¹³ This marked the first time that India dispatched aid to another nation to help it fight terrorism, marking an important development in New Delhi's attempts to burnish its credentials as an emerging security provider in the wider Asian region. India also expressed its concern at the Marawi situation and used this crisis to enhance anti-terror and de-radicalization partnerships with the Philippines. Relations with Vietnam, New Delhi's longstanding strategic partner in Southeast Asia, were also strengthened in 2017 with the designation of that year to be "Friendship Year" between India and Vietnam.

Korean Peninsula

The year 2017 witnessed a marked escalation of the Korean Peninsula crisis as the DPRK regime embarked on a series of nuclear and missile tests, in its search for an intercontinental ballistic missile capability that, when perfected, would place just about every major U.S. city within its range. While peripheral to the resolution of this increasingly intractable conflict, ASEAN was nevertheless still looked to by the conflict parties, including both the United States and the DPRK, to play something of an active role. In April the DPRK appealed to ASEAN to persuade the United States to take a softer stance in order to avert a nuclear holocaust, just as the United States confirmed the THAAD defence system in South Korea was operational. On the other hand, ASEAN foreign ministers were urged to cut ties with and strengthen sanctions on the DPRK by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson during the ASEAN-U.S. meeting in Washington DC in May.

The collapse of the Six Party Talks in 2009 left the ASEAN-led ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) as the remaining diplomatic institution that engages

all the major actors involved in the Korean Peninsula (apart from UN-related organizations). On 5 August, alongside the ARF, ASEAN foreign ministers issued a rare standalone statement expressing concern over developments in the region. This included a call for “the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner”.¹⁴ Without outright condemning the DPRK, it noted the threat to peace and urged the DPRK to comply with UN Security Council resolutions. Cambodia was reportedly unhappy with the document that went ahead anyway.¹⁵ The ASEAN defence ministers repeated the call for peace and for the DPRK to comply with Security Council resolutions in their 23 October statement.¹⁶ As the situation worsened, with repeated DPRK tests, ASEAN registered its heightened concerns with collective condemnation of the nuclear and missile tests. Meanwhile, the DPRK’s foreign minister, Ri Yong Ho, met four of the other Six Party Talks nations (excluding the United States) at the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Manila, just as new UN sanctions were being announced.¹⁷ In return, the United States proposed suspending DPRK membership from the ARF and also urged the Philippines to rescind its invitation to the DPRK before the forum.¹⁸ At the end of August, South Korea held its first Conference on ASEAN–Korea Partnership, where it welcomed ASEAN taking a more proactive role in addressing the crisis.¹⁹

One of the few countries with an embassy in Pyongyang, Malaysia’s relations with the DPRK soured over the murder of Kim Jong-nam, the half-brother of Kim Jong-un, in Kuala Lumpur on 13 February. The murder and subsequent investigations triggered tit-for-tat exchanges between the governments of the DPRK and Malaysia. Following the cancellation of DPRK visas and the expulsion of the DPRK ambassador on 4 March by Malaysia, Pyongyang retaliated by barring Malaysian nationals from entering or leaving the country, which was only resolved on 30 March. Malaysia further banned its citizens from travelling to the DPRK in September, and halted all imports from the DPRK in October.

The Regional Trade Agenda

The withdrawal of the United States from the TPP cast doubt on the future of the regional trade agenda. While Southeast Asia was not collectively represented in the TPP, by dint of the membership of four regional states — Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei — and the prospect of Indonesian and Thai participation in future, the TPP was nevertheless viewed as a major driver of the next cycle of economic growth and prosperity for the region. The TPP was also welcomed for establishing the “gold standard” in free trade agreements, not only in terms of tariff and non-tariff reductions but, significantly, on issues of labour relations

and intellectual property rights. The American withdrawal prompted the remaining eleven signatories to scramble to rescue the agreement. In the event, all eleven declared at the sidelines of the November APEC Summit their intention to advance a Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, or CPTPP. Essentially a revised TPP according to the joint ministerial statement, the CPTPP nevertheless differed from its predecessor on at least two counts. First, it suspends twenty provisions from chapters primarily dealing with services, procurement, and intellectual property rights that had hitherto been inserted at the insistence of the United States; and, second, it emphasized that members should be allowed to prioritize “country-specific” circumstances and conditions when making trade policy decisions.²⁰ Significantly, it has also been calculated that Southeast Asian signatories are likely to gain most from the CPTPP — Malaysia (2 per cent of GDP), Vietnam and Brunei (1.5 per cent), and Singapore (1 per cent).²¹

The Regional Comprehensive Partnership (RCEP) for Asia was flagged as a priority deliverable for ASEAN’s fiftieth anniversary year. Needless to say the matter of the conclusion of the RCEP gained greater strategic and economic urgency in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from the TPP and the need to boost waning enthusiasm for free trade globally. With the inclusion of India, China and Indonesia, the RCEP would be the world’s most populous free trade agreement, covering roughly half the world’s population and over a third of its GDP. The value of RCEP is further attested to by the fact that while ASEAN has “Plus One” trade deals with all the Plus Six countries, these involve different levels of agreement, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Nevertheless, harmonizing these will not be straightforward, especially as several Plus countries continue to be unenthusiastic about opening their markets to the other major economies, particularly India and China (who also lack a free trade agreement between them).

Ministerial level talks were held in May in Hanoi and September in Pasay City, Philippines, while the seventeenth to twentieth negotiating rounds took place in February/March in Kobe, May in Manila, July in Hyderabad, and October in Incheon. The Hyderabad round saw agreement on the *RCEP Key Elements for Significant Outcomes by End of 2017*, that aims to narrow the areas within which agreement can be reached. Nevertheless, ASEAN struggled to meet its target of concluding the agreement in 2017; with differences over the percentage of goods respective countries are willing to liberalize proving to be an especially stubborn stumbling block.²² Even as negotiations are now carried over into 2018, it is unlikely that agreement and ratification by all sixteen nations can be achieved before 2019; meaning implementation would start from 2020 at the very earliest.²³

While Southeast Asia made piecemeal progress in economic integration efforts with the broader Asia-Pacific and East Asian regions, intraregional integration

proved more difficult. Specifically, efforts to further advance the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) continued to face a host of obstacles. At the end of 2015, ASEAN declared that the AEC had been “established” according to the timeline set by regional leaders in 2007 with the Cebu Declaration, but the AEC itself had not yet been “realized” because of the need at the time to defer 105 of 506 measures that the organization set for itself as a target for the realization of an AEC.²⁴ While progress has been made on tariff reductions over the years, policy harmonization across member states and reductions in non-tariff barriers have proven considerably more challenging.

The Rohingya Issue

The year 2017 saw the worsening of one of the most tragic humanitarian crises in recent history. Following insurgent attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on three border police posts in October 2016 in Rakhine State, the Myanmar military waged an intensive (and extensive) operation to weed out militant elements among the estranged Muslim Rohingya community, the consequence of which was a mass exodus of Rohingya across the border to Bangladesh amidst mounting allegations of indiscriminate violence and human rights abuses on the part of Myanmar soldiers.

To be sure, the Rohingya problem is not new. Yet, the recent violence serves as a reminder of just how intractable the problem has become, particularly in terms of how deep-seated animosity between Buddhist and Muslim communities in Myanmar have been amplified, as well as how difficult the search for solutions would be even after transition to a democratically elected government. This last point is worth repeating given the tendency among Western media sources (and some governments) to believe that the problem could be resolved once democracy was simply allowed to flourish. In considering the role that the democratically elected National League for Democracy (NLD) government under Aung San Suu Kyi’s leadership can play, it bears recalling that constitutional changes enacted in 2008 effectively place the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) in charge of all security affairs in Rakhine State, to wit, conflict resolution can only derive from close cooperation between the elected government and the military. To that effect, any move by the civilian government to overtly criticize the military would likely have an adverse effect.

While clearly a domestic issue that bedevils Naypyitaw, the re-ignition of the Rohingya problem also posed challenges for ASEAN. The Rohingya crisis cast a pale shadow over the 30th ASEAN Summit in Manila, and mention of it was noticeably absent from both the formal agenda as well as the twenty-five-

page Chairman's Statement. This absence was almost certainly in observance of the organization's principle of non-interference. The Rohingya crisis posed particularly challenging problems for leaders of Muslim-majority countries in Southeast Asia, where popular opinion was vitriolic against Naypyitaw's handling of the humanitarian situation and demands for a robust response on the part of their governments especially vociferous. Indonesia's president, Joko Widodo, and foreign minister, Retno Marsudi, both held talks with Aung San Suu Kyi, highlighting that stability in Myanmar was vital not only for the country itself but also for the region. Malaysia went a step further in its expression of disapproval of the management of the crisis, with Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak equating Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya to "genocide". On its part, Myanmar responded by alleging Najib was using the Rohingya crisis to further his own political interests.²⁵ Malaysian foreign minister Anifah Aman expressed concern at the lack of initiative on the part of Myanmar to find a viable solution to the conflict, stating that: "though the Myanmar government has given its assurance to implement measures to solve the problem, the recent incidents of violence as widely reported by the media show that little, if any, progress has been achieved".²⁶ He also warned that failure to address the problem adequately would cause an influx of refugees to other states within ASEAN and increase the possibility of these displaced individuals being recruited by extremists, negatively affecting the security and stability of the region.

Malaysia's robust position on the Rohingya crisis created something of a crisis for ASEAN in September. On the occasion of the UN General Assembly in New York, a statement was issued by the foreign secretary of the Philippines, Alan Peter Cayetano, in his capacity as ASEAN Chair and purportedly representing the collective views of ASEAN foreign ministers, that they were "concerned over the recent developments in the Northern Rakhine State", and broadly denouncing "all acts of violence which resulted in loss of civilian lives, destruction of homes and displacement of large numbers of people".²⁷ Malaysia was quick to clarify that the statement issued did not reflect Kuala Lumpur's position on the crisis. Instead, the Malaysian foreign minister proceeded to release a statement declaring that Malaysia would be disassociating itself from the ASEAN Chairman's words for reasons that it did not specifically mention the Rohingya as one of the communities affected by the violence. Despite the fact that both Anifah and Cayetano's statements reproved the ARSA attack on Myanmar's security personnel on 25 August which triggered the recent violent spell in Rakhine state, it was this disagreement that seized the headlines and drew attention once again to the matter of ASEAN's unity, or lack thereof.²⁸

The Siege of Marawi City

While terrorism had been a security challenge particularly for the maritime states of Southeast Asia for some years, matters gained greater urgency in 2017 when the risk of ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and as-Sham) establishing a foothold in the region found acute expression in the southern Philippines. On 23 May, Muslim militants who claimed affiliation with ISIS swarmed over Marawi City in the main southern Philippine island of Mindanao, easily overrunning police and government forces in the process. Initially led by the Maute Group, a militant organization which had earlier claimed allegiance to ISIS, the militants comprised not only Filipinos but also fighters from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Yemen and Saudi Arabia. President Duterte swiftly placed the area under martial law, while security officials and media confidently predicted that the siege would be brought to an end by Philippine Independence Day on 12 June.²⁹ In the event, five months of intensive urban warfare ensued, far longer than Manila had predicted or was prepared for, and the siege was only declared ended on 23 October. Needless to say, the siege has staggered the Philippines and underscored broader concerns that terrorists continue to harbour ambitions to make the southern Philippines an area and base for operations in Southeast Asia. In that respect, the situation in the southern Philippines has become both a cause and a consequence of radicalization across the region.

In mid-July, ASEAN began flying out its ASEAN relief items stored in the hub in Subang (Malaysia) under the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre).³⁰ The AHA Centre was set up in 2011 in Jakarta to facilitate regional and international collaboration in times of crisis, and included an Emergency Rapid Assessment Team (ERAT) that aimed to provide dozens of rapidly deployable experts to a specific area in times of disaster. The deployment for Marawi was completed with the support of the Malaysian government, which mobilized its military aircraft to expedite the mission. The extent of support from the AHA Centre included more than six hundred tents for families, family kits and three thousand personal hygiene supplies, six hundred kitchen sets and four filtration units for water to cater for the population displaced by the violence.³¹ This effort proved a concrete expression of the ASEAN declaration of One ASEAN, One Response, signed last September at the 28th ASEAN Summit to achieve a more effective and cohesive response to disasters. Upon the conclusion of the Marawi siege, the 11th ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) saw officials reaffirming their commitment to work together on countering all forms of violent extremism. ASEAN member-states also expressed full support for the Philippines' efforts to address the security

and humanitarian situation and acknowledged the need for enhanced regional cooperation.³²

Assistance did not come only from ASEAN. China immediately rendered assistance by way of almost US\$12 million of military equipment in June.³³ In October it delivered heavy equipment to the Department of Public Works and Highways to be used for the major rehabilitation effort of Marawi City.³⁴ Despite the anti-U.S. rhetoric of President Duterte, American assistance was swiftly extended to — and readily received by — the Philippine government to help counter the militants in Marawi. This included an initial aid package of at least US\$13.5 million worth of weapons and equipment dispatched in late May, followed by twenty-five combat rubber raiding craft and thirty outboard motors to assist the Philippine Armed Forces in its counterterrorism efforts. In January, a Raven tactical UAV system was delivered and in July the United States transferred two C-208 Cessna surveillance aircraft to the Philippine Air Force for operations in Marawi. Grey Eagle drones were also supplied, and they proved crucial in the provision of intelligence information necessary for the Philippine military forces to regain control of the city. Further to that, the United States also deployed more than a hundred soldiers to advise and train local troops for the fight against the Muslim extremists in Marawi.³⁵

Conclusion

The year 2017 was one of celebration for Southeast Asia as it commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the formation of ASEAN. But, in many ways, it was also a year of introspection. Shifts in the geopolitical configuration in the region, prompted in no small part by the change in government in the United States, set in motion dynamics that quickly challenged ASEAN in terms of how they threatened to alter the strategic, economic and diplomatic landscape in the region. ASEAN pursued a diversified engagement strategy in response, and this will necessarily be its approach for the foreseeable future in order for the small states in the region to avoid having to choose sides.

Even so, these efforts are likely to come under increasing pressure in the coming years on at least three counts. First, the revival of the Quadrilateral Dialogue featuring the United States, Japan, India and Australia — ironically, as a sideshow to the November ASEAN Summit — suggests impending pressure on ASEAN as it seeks to reinforce its regional role on the notion of ASEAN Centrality. Second, the new strategic focus among these regional powers on the “Indo-Pacific” that accompanies the revival of the “Quad” raises the question of where Southeast

Asia fits into this geopolitical concept, not to mention the geostrategic thinking of its proponents, in terms of priorities. Third, with China having consolidated its domestic politics, it is widely expected that Beijing will now return its attention to pressing its interests in the region more assertively, and this will doubtless have consequences for Southeast Asia. All said, developments in 2017 point to the fact that the coming years will require ASEAN to attend to challenges emanating not only from within the region but also as a result of the centrifugal forces hastened by great power politics taking place in its neighbourhood.

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