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Central Asia and Southeast Asia: Towards Greater Engagement amidst Common Geopolitical Challenges

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SYNOPSIS

Central Asia and Southeast Asia share geopolitical circumstances and challenges that deserve greater policy attention in their respective interactions with powerful states impinging on regional interests. Both regions should engage with each other more to share experiences and views on how best to respond to great-power tensions and pressure.

COMMENTARY

Central Asia and Southeast Asia are two distinct regions in Asia. At a glance, they are very different, in terms of history, culture, language, and ethnicity. However, both share geopolitical similarities that are worthy of closer examination, particularly amidst today's great-power tensions and pressure from intensifying US-China rivalry and the Russia-Ukraine war. I will examine this through three prisms – their geopolitical environment, their states' hedging behaviour, and their regionalism efforts – and argue that they should engage with each other more to address their common geopolitical challenges.

Geopolitical Challenges

The states in both regions are faced with increasing great-power tensions and pressure to choose sides, particularly amidst rising US-China rivalry and the Russia-Ukraine war. China looms large in both regions as a powerful neighbour that is spreading its political, military and economic influence, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that runs through both regions, leading it to be seen as pursuing a neo-mercantilist strategy.

In Southeast Asia, US-China rivalry dominates the strategic environment with potential

flashpoints over Taiwan and the South China Sea, placing pressure on Southeast Asian states to choose sides. In Central Asia, where the loaded term the Great Game is often applied to, there is strategic competition between Russia and China with the West.

Russia and China share strategic convergence and interests in countering US global predominance, while arguably having been in a strategic condominium in Central Asia, with a broad and informal division of labour that both powers have largely been comfortable with. Russia is seen as the traditional regional security guarantor with Moscow often treating Central Asia as its privileged sphere of influence since it was part of both the erstwhile Russian empire and Soviet Union. China, on the other hand, plays an increasing economic role in Central Asia, including through its BRI, and gradually displacing Russia's previous economic dominance.

Recently, however, this line has become increasingly blurred. China has been expanding its security footprint in Central Asia, establishing bases in Tajikistan and increasing arms exports to the region, while Russia's political and military clout have been waning due to its war with Ukraine. Russia has also stepped up its economic engagement with Central Asia to help ease the impact from extensive Western sanctions.

The Russia-Ukraine war and subsequent Western sanctions have made Russia increasingly isolated from the world economy and more reliant on China, and becoming increasingly the junior partner in the relationship. This blurring of regional roles and increasing strategic imbalance arguably sets the stage for growing tensions and potential geostrategic rivalry in Central Asia in the future.

The Hedging Imperative

Central Asia and Southeast Asia also consist of states that vary from small states like Laos and Kyrgyzstan to arguably "middle power" states like Indonesia and Kazakhstan. The states in both regions are also in asymmetrical relationships with their respective region's great powers and share similar foreign policy responses.

The foreign policies of Central Asian states are often described as "multi-vector", while in Southeast Asia it is described as "omnidirectional" or "multidirectional". In aim and practice, they are both pursuing a hedging strategy, neither balancing nor bandwagoning, and seeking to diversify their foreign relations to secure as many security, political and economic dividends as possible.

They also seek to enhance their bargaining position whilst minimising potential threats. This hedging strategy has become even more imperative in the face of mounting geopolitical pressures as they seek to preserve their strategic autonomy and to create a stable environment for their economic development.

However, their hedging effectiveness varies according to their capability and geostrategic environment. The case of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is similar to that of Laos and Cambodia, for instance. Due to their limited capabilities and resources, proximity to China, and overwhelming dependence on Chinese investments and loans, they have less room for manoeuvre. These states are thus more restricted in

their pursuance of a hedging strategy, compared with more resourceful and advantageously located countries like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in Central Asia, and Indonesia, Vietnam and Singapore in Southeast Asia.

Another constraint on the Central Asian states is their geographic position as landlocked states as this makes them dependent on their neighbours for access to the global market. This is in sharp contrast to Southeast Asian countries where all, except Laos, are coastal states strategically positioned along the important maritime routes of the South China Sea and the Malacca Straits, hence giving them greater access to the world market and more strategic flexibility. However, major energy exporters like Kazakhstan have succeeded more than their energy-poor neighbours in courting foreign partners and investors and establishing multiple energy routes to different markets in order to reduce their strategic vulnerability.

Hedging Regionalism

While Southeast Asia has been relatively successful in its ASEAN regionalism project, Central Asian states have been less so. Like Southeast Asian states, external threats and common interests have prompted Central Asian states to enhance their regional cooperation. However, they have so far been unsuccessful as their attempts have often been thwarted by Russia.

Attempts were also derailed by mutual suspicion and rivalry, particularly between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the two leading states in Central Asia. This has changed with Uzbekistan's new President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who opened up the country and improved relations with its neighbours. Recognising the need for greater regional cooperation, the Central Asian states are cooperating with each other more and there is discernible momentum towards an exclusive Central Asian regionalism.

Four "consultative" summits have been held in Kazakhstan (2018), Uzbekistan (2019), Turkmenistan (2021) and Kyrgyzstan (2022), which seem set to become a regular dialogue forum. They also have so-called C5+1 dialogues, in which the five Central Asian states engage with individual external powers like Japan, South Korea, the EU, India, the US and recently Russia and China.

Central Asian states recognise the need for such a dialogue platform to manage relations with external powers. This is similar to the use of ASEAN as a hedging platform to manage relations with the great powers, through ASEAN-led fora such as the ARF, ASEAN+3, and East Asia Summit. The aim is to ensure that no individual power dominates, enmeshing them in a network of diplomatic and economic relations in which ASEAN can assert influence. I call this "hedging regionalism", i.e., the use of regional cooperation platforms as a hedging mechanism, which is one of the attractions of the ASEAN model for Central Asian states.

Another attraction is normative convergence where the ASEAN values of sovereignty, non-interference, consensus, flexibility and informality (with focus on regime security, economic development and stability over democracy promotion), converge well with the norms, principles, and priorities held by Central Asian leaders.

Yet another is ASEAN's "soft regionalism" approach, focusing on consensus,

consultations, flexibility and weak institutions that do not override national sovereignty, unlike the "hard regionalism" of the EU with its formal integration and institutionalisation.

Central Asian states, therefore, often look to the ASEAN model as one of the main examples of successful regionalism to emulate.

Towards Greater Engagement

The return of great-power conflicts adds to other common global threats such as climate change, pandemics, and terrorism. To address these shared challenges, states have to step up their cooperation not only intra-regionally but also inter-regionally. Due to their similar geopolitical environments, states in Central Asia and Southeast Asia have much to learn from each other on how best to respond to these shared geopolitical challenges.

There should thus be greater engagement and dialogue between the two regions, for instance, through a C5+ASEAN dialogue format where they can share their experiences and responses to increasing great-power rivalry and pressure. The periodic bilateral meetings between individual ASEAN and Central Asian Foreign Ministers on the sidelines of the annual United Nations General Assembly in New York are not enough to establish a multi-vector and omnidirectional policy of cooperation beneficial to both regions' strategic future.

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