

Out of order

MATHEW DAVIES - 20 MAR, 2017

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has called for ASEAN to defend the international rules-based order. But while this vision is desirable, whether it is realistic is another question all together, writes Mathew Davies.

What does Australia want from ASEAN?

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop gave a clear answer in her speech in Manila on 16 March. In a memorable phrase, Ms Bishop called for ASEAN to use its 'moral voice' to defend not only peace but the "international rules-based order" against "the might is right doctrine of bygone eras."

This call, strongly echoing the US position under former President Barack Obama as outlined at the February 2016 Sunnylands Summit, provides new strategic clarity to Australia's engagement with Southeast Asia. The vision is of an ASEAN working in concert with Australia in defence of international affairs regulated by shared principles. As Ms Bishop noted, these principles include peaceful resolution of disputes, fair and objective mechanisms to manage disagreements, and respect for treaties, courts and arbitration.

These principles are at the core of the legal framework of ASEAN itself, and deeply entwined in its history over the last 50 years. Ms Bishop noted that ASEAN was established to promote regional peace and stability and this remained its core mission today.

Ms Bishop did not appear to be asking ASEAN to be something it cannot be. If she was asking was for ASEAN to become *more* ASEAN – to defend the core principles it itself has outlined in its treaties and charters, in a volatile region and, through this, facilitate a region that is compatible with Australia's own national interests.

However, having a vision of what we may want is only half of the process. The other half must be a realistic vision of what we can expect to get. Here I see two potential problems with the vision outlined by Ms Bishop in Manila.

The first is the problem of capacity. ASEAN's primary focus has since 1967 been internal – bringing some sort of order to Southeast Asia. ASEAN's way of doing this has been low-key and, despite the tensions between members, based on a fundamental collective belief that 'the region' was a suitable and shared space to address these tensions. ASEAN's way of achieving this has not been due to strong centralised actions or the policing of members. Instead it has been through the slow, gradual development of common beliefs about legitimacy.

These values are the same that Ms Bishop now wants ASEAN to take a stand on externally – to use its 'moral voice' to defend the rules of the game it has promoted internally. But this is a very different thing and I doubt that ASEAN can play such a proactive role.

Most importantly there is no shared understanding of the desirability of an Asia-Pacific wide solution to regional problems as there was in Southeast Asia. Different ASEAN states have very different relations with leading states in the broader Asia-Pacific and this limits ASEAN's ability to say much at all or to create any common position on pressing issues. Relationships with China and the United States cut across proclamations of ASEAN unity and centrality in deep ways and no country in Southeast Asia is going to give up an advantageous bilateral relationship with a super power in favour of a diffuse sense of obligation to ASEAN.

The second problem is that of over-simplification. It is tempting to see a world split between those selflessly promoting a fabled rules-based order (fast assuming the role of the Camelot of international relations – a fabled history from which we today have fallen but remember fondly), and those who seek to subvert it for self-interest. If only it were so simple.

Today's rules-based order is the product of American power and, as such, is not a value-free, or naturally occurring thing, even if it is a creation that has more generalised benefits than previous ways of ordering international relations – like empires for example. This is not a contest of might versus order, this is a contest between orders.

This does not mean that we should shy away from the defence of an order that we are comfortable with and we believe to be appropriate. But, it does mean that how countries view the ingredients of international order and the justice of the current arrangements are going to vary significantly.

We must also recognise what the complexities of today's international order mean in terms of the policy choices that we and our neighbours face. The paradox is that the rules-based order Ms Bishop lauds when she spoke of the rules that gave Brunei the same standing as the US or China, is the same rules-based order that empowers Cambodia to blunt ASEAN's collective approach to the South China Sea through the exercise of its sovereign rights. It's also the same order that encourages China to play a game of dividing ASEAN members through a mix of diplomatic and economic statecraft. Orders are messy and complex and do not come with neat edges.

Ultimately, however, whatever the value of Ms Bishop's speech (and I think it an important step forwards in terms of clarity and breadth of vision) its success depends not only on Australian thinking. What is needed is ASEAN itself to decide what it wants in a volatile Asia-Pacific, and for its answer to respond to the practical challenges it faces.

What Ms Bishop has done then is outline a vision for ASEAN, one that is true to the central story of its history and ambitious about the role ASEAN might play in the future – she has, then, offered ASEAN a view of what its next chapter could be. The decision as to whether this will be the next chapter, or nothing but a footnote in a story written by others, will be made in the 10 capitals of Southeast Asia, not next to Lake Burley-Griffin.

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