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LSE Southeast Asia Forum

Friday 13th May 2016

The Lincoln Centre, London, WC2A 3ED

Panel I: ASEAN Security

Chair

Jurgen Haacke (LSE SEAC)

Speakers

Joern Dosch (University of Rostock)

Bill Hayton (BBC, Chatham House)

Thitinan Pongsudhirak (Chulalongkorn University)

Joern Dosch commented that the mainstream literature on ASEAN tend to focus on big-power politics, diplomacy and geopolitical rivalry between the major powers. To obtain a more balanced and realistic view on what was happening it was necessary to broaden one's empirical base in the study of ASEAN. Dr Dosch added that the peaceful regional order of ASEAN was taken for granted by academics and that academic scholarship tend to focus more on security issues within ASEAN which incidentally was of less importance to the general ASEAN public. It was suggested that ASEAN at present was "truning-in-circles" as it found itself confronted with a new institutional structure (unlike the Cold War). Finally, it was observed that the ASEAN political-security community was not a side show, it represents a main pillar of the ASEAN community and thus should be taken seriously.

Bill Hayton commented that ASEAN relations reflected a mismatch of expectations given the ongoing debate whether ASEAN was a neutral region or an external construct. He cited a Singaporean diplomat's words concerning criticisms towards ASEAN as akin to "[accusing] a cow of being an imperfect house."

On ASEAN-China relations, Hayton noted that ASEAN needed China for its infrastructure and development aid and that there exists both opportunities and threats for ASEAN in relating with China. Noting that rifts within Southeast Asia were problematic, Hayton said that ASEAN's reactions to the SCS disputes were frequently in response to Chinese actions in the SCS. He expressed pessimism towards any conclusion to a Code of Conduct and postulated various outcomes of the present territorial deadlock.

Thitinan Pongsudhirak gave a sobering assessment of ASEAN's relations, both within ASEAN and with external powers. He added that the region was likely to witness further tensions in both the maritime and mainland theatres. On the maritime, China was likely to play by its own rules while on the mainland Southeast Asia (especially in the Mekong region), maritime tensions featured less acutely.



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Notwithstanding internal and external challenges, Pongsudhirak shared that ASEAN has been generally successful in its regional engagement. The recent Chinese economic slowdown will also the dynamics of ASEAN-China relations, particularly among states which are reliant on China for their economic growth. In addition, geography also plays a crucial role in China's behavior towards ASEAN. In the case of the mainland, it was noted that China could "do what they please" as there was little means for external intervention. However on the maritime theatre, the presence of the United States limited the extent to which China could act unilaterally. In order for ASEAN to be reclaim influence from external powers, it would have to develop new growth models within ASEAN so that it would not be so reliant on external powers.

Written by Rapporteur

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