

*Herding Cats: Coordination Challenges in ASEAN's Approach to China**

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Abstract

ASEAN-China relations do not fit neatly within the rubric of bilateral ties, unlike the set of dyadic interactions examined in this collection. ASEAN is a disparate collection of states that sometimes work with each other with some mutual understanding about consensus, non-intervention, and autonomy, claims about centrality notwithstanding. Domestically, ASEAN members need also to navigate various political cleavages and latent anti-colonial, even PRC-skeptical, sentiments that can emerge when interacting with China. Any position or arrangement the grouping undertakes with respect to China, particularly the Chinese state, must first overcome these coordination problems. One way is through the presence of a common focal point among ASEAN members, which can be difficult to realize. ASEAN's unwieldy policy making process, born from an initial desire to deescalate tensions and avoid conflict among members, can prevent the group and its members from being forced to take positions by major powers, including the People's Republic of China (PRC). This is exemplified by ASEAN's repeated claims of wanting to avoid a choice between the United States and PRC to sidestep difficult decisions that may invite major power blowback. Yet, this slow and halting approach also stymies ASEAN's ability to take the initiative and establish conditions that enable meaningful autonomy when U.S.-PRC competition is intensifying. This article explains why this phenomenon persists despite the growing risks it poses to ASEAN and its relations with the PRC.

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