Tricky balancing act for Asean leaders

They need to manage US-China rivalry at East Asia Summit

By Zakri Hussain

ASEAN leaders meeting in Bali this week will pledge to chart a united stand on global issues over the coming decade, to collectively give the 10 members a better chance of influencing what happens in the region.

But an immediate concern is how to navigate the murky waters ahead at a time of greater rivalry between the United States and China, even as Asean nations work to deepen links with both giants.

On Friday, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono will launch a Beijing-based Asean-China centre to raise awareness of the group and attract investments, trade and tourism from Asia’s largest economies.

At the same time, Asean leaders hope US President Barack Obama’s participation at the East Asia Summit (EAS) on Saturday – the first time America is joining in – will revitalise the superpowers’ engagement with the region.

Asean’s efforts to create a space for itself between the two powers underscore the reality: whereas the smiles and rhetoric, the US and China will continue to push their agendas and assert their influence in the neighbourhood, and this is likely to get more intense.

As international relations academic Ball points out, “that’s what great powers do.”

In this context, observers say Asean’s challenge is to take the lead on concrete issues in a way that is acceptable to both Beijing and Washington.

It also has to deal with fears that its voice may be diluted at the EAS, a forum between Asean and key dialogue partners.

The forum now has 18 members: Asean’s 10 nations plus China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand and newcomers the US and Russia.

The EAS is expected to deliver some non-controversial goals this week: financing needed improvements to infrastructure in South-east Asia, improving education links, managing disasters and combating communicable diseases.

Associate Professor Ball points to a statement from the Prime Minister’s Office, PM Lee will also be taking part in Asean’s summits with dialogue partners China, India, Japan and South Korea.

“It does not want the issue raised at the summit, which it stressed was ‘for discussion economic cooperation and development’.”

Former Asean secretary-general Rodolfo Severino has expressed concern that China’s growing links in the region, he noted, have led its policymakers to feel ambivalent about the EAS.

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“China always seems to be on the wrong side. If it is too active, people are fearful about it becoming too assertive.”

But if it stays a bit more aloof, then “But it if it stays a bit more aloof, then it’s not assuming the kind of regional responsibilities it ought to be taking on,” said Prof Tang. “Damned if you’re active, damned if you’re not.”