Top diplomat warns Southeast Asia to unite over Chinese territorial claims

Regional debate: Peter Varghese (left), with former Singapore diplomat Kishore Mahbubani, Blackmores chief executive Christine Holgate and Indonesian vice-presidential adviser Dwi Fortuna Anwar at the Crawford Australian Leadership Forum. Sean Davey

Australia’s top diplomat issued a blunt call to Southeast Asian countries to maintain a unified approach to regional tensions such as China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea or lose their key role in the region’s economic and security architecture.

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade secretary Peter Varghese said the 10-member Association of Southeast Asians Nations was well placed to lead regional institutions such as the East Asia Summit because it was seen as
neutral but it would be regarded as hollow if it could not maintain agreed positions.

At the Crawford Australian Leadership Forum in Canberra, Mr Varghese specifically warned the ASEAN countries that they needed to maintain a common position on an imminent international court decision on a case taken by the Philippines over China’s so-called nine dash line claiming a vast section of the South China Sea.

The comments reflect growing concern in the federal government that the ASEAN group risks being split by the China-US rivalry. The concern has deepened since the group’s foreign ministers last week retracted an agreed statement about the South China Sea after a meeting in China.

The Philippines case was a key test for ASEAN about "what kind of culture do we want to see embedded in the region", said Mr Varghese, who may have been speaking more openly because he is due to retire soon.

Related articles

China tops list of world's supercomputers - again
47 mins ago

For Walmart in China, size is everything

Trump presidency threatens ANZUS

US on offensive over South China Sea ahead of Hague ruling

Latest Stories

Target faces pain before gain
6 mins ago

John Holland to dig $324m Metro Rail tunnels
6 mins ago

The comments reflect growing concern in the federal government that the ASEAN group risks being split by the China-US rivalry. The concern has deepened since the group’s foreign ministers last week retracted an agreed statement about the South China Sea after a meeting in China.

The Philippines case was a key test for ASEAN about "what kind of culture do we want to see embedded in the region", said Mr Varghese, who may have been speaking more openly because he is due to retire soon.