

Roundtable: ASEAN at Fifty and Beyond

One of the most recognizable and durable regional intergovernmental organizations in the world, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will commemorate its golden jubilee on 8 August 2017, fifty years after the signing of the ASEAN Declaration in Bangkok by Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines. The “ASEAN-5” were later joined by Brunei on 7 January 1984, Vietnam on 28 July 1995, Laos and Myanmar on 23 July 1997 and Cambodia on 30 April 1999, comprising what is today the ten member states of ASEAN.

To mark the 50th anniversary of ASEAN’s establishment, the editors of *Contemporary Southeast Asia* invited eight senior policy practitioners and academics to chart the organization’s evolution, assess its successes and failures and contemplate its future development.

In the first article, Marty Natalegawa highlights the “transformative” contributions ASEAN has made to regional dynamics, especially its key roles in building strategic trust among the countries of Southeast Asia, insulating the region from Great Power politics and promoting a people-centred outlook. In the second article, Tang Siew Mun also examines the transformative effects ASEAN has wrought on regional politics, but questions whether the organization’s founding principles and practices are sufficient to meet the current and future geoeconomic and geopolitical challenges facing Southeast Asia.

In the third article, Walter Woon appraises the ASEAN Charter a decade after it came into effect. As Woon notes, the purpose of the Charter was to provide ASEAN with a legal personality, put the organization on a proper institutional footing and ensure that the member states followed through on their obligations. The Charter remains a work in progress, and as ASEAN evolves so too will its Charter, but slowly and cautiously.

The fourth article, by John Ciorciari, focuses on how ASEAN has shaped regional interactions with the Great Powers since the mid-1960s. Ciorciari argues that while Great Power politics had the effect of spurring ASEAN unity in its first few decades, those same geopolitical forces now make that unity increasingly difficult to achieve.

The fifth and sixth articles examine the three ASEAN-led forums devoted to the management of regional security. See Seng Tan looks at the establishment and evolution of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus). He traces their contributions to managing regional security problems and fostering cooperation, but contends that over the past few years they have become "arenas for Great Power sparring" and that this may limit their effectiveness in the future. Nick Bisley's article on the East Asia Summit (EAS) follows a similar theme as Tan's piece. Bisley reviews the EAS' rationales and its progression over the past twelve years, but argues that its potential could also be frustrated by "Asia's increasingly contested regional order".

In the seventh article, Amitav Acharya explodes the myths and clarifies the misconceptions associated with the concept of ASEAN "centrality". Acharya describes the notion of centrality as "ambitious, ambiguous and impractical" and identifies four challenges to it: diminishing intra-ASEAN cohesion; the unravelling of ASEAN neutrality; the emergence of a China-centric regional order; and the decline of the US-led international order under President Donald Trump.

In the final article, Donald Emmerson considers what the next few decades might hold for ASEAN by sketching five possible alternative futures: ASEAN as a convener; an association focused on economic issues only; an adjunct of China; a grouping of maritime states; or a centralized union.

As much as the authors have been critical of ASEAN, they have also highlighted the positive contributions the organization has made to regional peace, stability and prosperity. ASEAN may have its share of imperfections and contradictions, but its enduring existence for the past fifty years demonstrates that ASEAN has done something right, and illustrates its continued relevance as the one and only regional organization of choice for the countries in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, as all our authors argue, ASEAN's future will critically depend on the adroit political and diplomatic skills of its member states in maintaining the organization's strategic

autonomy in an era of growing Chinese preponderance and increasing Sino–US competition.

ASEAN has always been closely associated with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore as both institutions were set up within a year of each other, and the study of ASEAN has traditionally been a central research plank of ISEAS, culminating in the establishment of the ASEAN Studies Centre in 2008. This roundtable of eminent scholars and practitioners, aptly put together at an opportune time, no doubt enriches the study of ASEAN at Fifty and Beyond for the benefit of earnest and intelligent discourse both within and outside Southeast Asia.

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The Expansion of ASEAN and the Changing Dynamics of Southeast Asia

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The contributions ASEAN has made to Southeast Asia over the past five decades have been nothing short of transformative.

First, ASEAN has been critical in transforming the nature and dynamics of relations among the countries of Southeast Asia, helping to build “strategic trust” where once “trust deficits” and even open conflict abounded. Second, ASEAN has been invaluable in transforming the countries of Southeast Asia from being “pawns” and the objects of the Great Powers’ direct and indirect “proxy” rivalries, to being in the “driving seat” in shaping and moulding the region’s political-security and economic architecture. Third, and often least recognized, ASEAN has promoted a more people-centred and people-oriented outlook.

While it is possible to disaggregate ASEAN’s three-level contributions, in practice they are interrelated. They are either positively reinforcing — a virtuous cycle — or negatively impacting on one another — a vicious cycle — depending on the adroitness of regional policymakers in promoting synergy or “equilibrium” among demands which are sometimes appear to be in conflict with one another.

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Thus, for example, the transformation that ASEAN has made possible in relations among Southeast Asian countries has had positive “multiplier effects” in the other two domains identified above. The cohesion and unity among Southeast Asian states have been prerequisites for ASEAN’s “centrality” in the wider Asia-Pacific region. Similarly, the decades of peace and stability that the countries of Southeast Asia have enjoyed have been *sine qua non* for economic development.

From the vantage point of August 2017, when differing views on the South China Sea have at times scuppered ASEAN’s consensus on the dispute, and the slow pace of community-building has been a constant reminder of the diversity of views and interests prevalent within ASEAN, it is all too common to lament the expansion of ASEAN from five to ten members¹ on ASEAN’s consensus-based decision-making. Indeed, in the face of diplomatic deadlocks, it has become increasingly common to question the continuing efficacy of consensus-based decision-making.

However, such views fail to fully appreciate the groundbreaking and transformative nature of the ASEAN project when it was conceived in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines, and its subsequent expansion to include Brunei Darussalam (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos (1997), Myanmar (1997) and Cambodia (1999) — the latter four known collectively as the CLMV countries.

Prior to the establishment of ASEAN, Southeast Asia was notable for the absence of a durable region-wide organization. The 1954 Southeast Asia Treaty Organization was notable for having more *non*-Southeast Asian states than Southeast Asian countries,² while both the 1963 MAPHLINDO³ and the 1961 Association of Southeast Asia⁴ proved short-lived.

More than the matter of inclusive membership, however, it is important to recognize the “dynamics-changing” contribution of ASEAN’s establishment and its subsequent expansion on relations among Southeast Asian countries.

The hitherto conflict-ridden relations between the founding members of ASEAN were gradually transformed through the conversion of trust deficits to strategic trust. Step-by-step, the countries of the then nascent ASEAN — albeit each for its own unique reasons and motivations — began a process of trust and confidence-building, and to place at the forefront conflict prevention, management and even, resolution, mindsets.

Although intractable differences remained, the ASEAN members demonstrated increasing readiness to manage them in the interests of

the region as a whole, without prejudice or without abandoning each other's principled positions. This dynamics-changing contribution of ASEAN's establishment owed much to the policies of the founding members. At the same time, however, like regions elsewhere, a "conditions-conducive" for the development of effective regionalism in Southeast Asia has been the exertion of "positive" leadership by its largest member, Indonesia.

Hence, the birth of ASEAN in 1967 coincided with the fundamental shift in Indonesia's regional policies and outlook post-1965 that jettisoned the previous confrontational foreign policy. Indonesia's regional outlook has had a direct bearing on the region's fortunes: negatively and positively. Indonesia's adoption of ASEAN as the cornerstone of its foreign policy — the projection of cooperative leadership and partnership, and the scrupulous avoidance of diplomatic heavy-handedness — contributed significantly to transforming regional dynamics.

Of course, it took more than a change in outlook in Jakarta to alter the dynamics of Southeast Asia. A sense of common regional ownership and participation in the ASEAN project in *all* ASEAN capitals has always been essential. Devoid of such traits, ASEAN would merely become an instrument for the promotion of the interests of its larger members. Instead, each of the founding members was able to see the benefits of effective regional cooperation and, more importantly, for itself: the convergence and synergy of national and regional interests. In short, the attainment of "equilibrium" between the national interests of each ASEAN member and the region's common interests.

This transformation in the dynamics between the founding members of ASEAN did not occur overnight. Over time, ASEAN as an organization began to manifest such spirit as the so-called "ASEAN way" — the preference for consensus decision-making and the building of "comfort levels" over direct and open divisions — in its institutions and state practice. Without doubt, the seminal 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), also known as the Bali Concord I, best epitomizes the changing dynamics.⁵ The TAC's provisions on settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful means, as well as the renunciation of the threat or use of force, constituted a radical departure for a region where tensions and open conflict had once been the norm. And, notably, the TAC made provisions for the accession of Southeast Asian states that were not then members of ASEAN.

The challenge of transforming the dynamics between the founding members would pale into insignificance, however, compared to the

one involving an expanded ASEAN. Besides the evident national-level variations — political and economic systems and development stages, as well as societal-cultural make-up — each of the then prospective ASEAN members pursued distinct foreign policy orientations in the then all-consuming Cold War divide: from being pro-Western, pro-Soviet, pro-China, to non-aligned, or even, in the case of Myanmar, autarkic. As a matter of fact, prior to ASEAN-10, the region was home to “two Southeast Asias”: ASEAN on the one hand, and the non-ASEAN states on the other, with latent and historical divisions sharply magnified by the then prevailing US–USSR–China strategic triangle.

Clearly, Southeast Asia is a region that defines diversity. In the absence of a region-wide organization, Southeast Asia was a perfect vortex of the negative interplay of local–national–regional–global dynamics; a region sharply divided by forces and dynamics largely beyond its control. To ASEAN’s credit, however, such realities did not serve as deterrents to its further expansion and evolution. Instead, ASEAN recognized the need to continue to evolve if it was to remain relevant in the constantly changing environment.

Thus, while the 1978–91 Cambodian conflict served as one of the most vivid illustrations of the deep divide in Southeast Asia, ultimately it also served as a catalyst for new dynamics in the region. The Jakarta Informal Meeting process initiated in 1988, which led to the conflict’s resolution through the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement, for instance, ushered the early beginnings of a habit of communication among Southeast Asian countries, despite their sharp differences.

In particular, it provided a reminder for the countries of the region of the potential benefits of promoting greater understanding of each other’s perspectives and views. New dynamics were instilled; a wake-up call, beyond the then countries of ASEAN, that Southeast Asian countries have a common interest in not allowing the region to become the proxy battleground for the interests of extra-regional powers.

An inclusive ASEAN that encompasses the entire region has been *conditio sine qua non* for Southeast Asia’s geopolitical transformation. In particular, for ASEAN’s stabilizing impact to be fully felt and to be of practical relevance, it is actually more essential, rather than less, that it admitted the CLMV countries despite their divergent political systems and differing stages of economic development. Despite the initial suggestion that ASEAN was an organization that would serve as a bulwark against communism during the Cold War, ASEAN would not have been as impactful if it had remained an organization that simply brought together “like-minded” countries.

Only an inclusive ASEAN would be able to play a critical “bridging” role between the then divided countries of Southeast Asia, and positively alter regional dynamics.

Indonesia, devoid of allegiance to either of the contending Cold War protagonists, certainly regarded ASEAN-10 as a major foreign policy goal. Although ASEAN-10 has meant that the task of attaining and maintaining ASEAN unity became even more challenging, this has been deemed essential given the “indivisibility” of peace. In essence, for trust and confidence to be established and sustained throughout Southeast Asia, it is crucial that the region as a whole is the beneficiary of a stable and peaceful regional order. Southeast Asia cannot tolerate indefinitely pockets of instability and conflict within it just as much as is the case with pockets of poverty in the region.

Moreover, only with ASEAN-10, can the region effectively develop a coherent and cohesive “external relations” stance as epitomized in the various ASEAN-initiated and led diplomatic processes such the “Plus One”, “Plus Three”, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS). Critically, it is important to emphasize that at no time has it been suggested that ASEAN should explicitly take precedence over the broader foreign policy orientations of its member states that have remained varied and diversified. Instead of such a “zero-sum” approach, until recent times, “equilibrium” has been struck between the promotion of common ASEAN interests and its member states’ own unique and well-established broader foreign policy orientations and that the two not be diametrically opposed.

Also notable, the transition from ASEAN-5 to ASEAN-10 was not accompanied by destabilizing extra-regional geopolitical dynamics. Rather than becoming sources for geopolitical ruptures — witness the post-Cold War expansion of NATO which created tensions between the West and Russia — ASEAN-10 has served as a unifying hub for dialogue and communication between the non-ASEAN states of the wider region whose relationships have often been inimical.⁶ The diversity of ASEAN member states’ foreign policy orientations, and their traditional links with countries outside of Southeast Asia, have until recently been pragmatically managed and utilized in a complementary and mutually reinforcing manner, rather than becoming seeds for divisions.

Furthermore, at the national level, ASEAN-5, and subsequently ASEAN-10, has proved invaluable in managing and promoting peaceful change. Thus, it is all too often overlooked how ASEAN, in particular the ASEAN Political Security Community pillar, has

proved to be “climate conducive” for the process of fundamental democratic change in the Philippines, Indonesia and Myanmar. In particular, the latter’s membership of ASEAN during the critical phase of its internal reform process, was of great importance in ensuring mutually reinforcing positive national–regional dynamics in support of that process. In contrast to the local–national–regional–global travails that have accompanied the so-called “Arab Spring” in parts of the Middle East, the contributions of the expanded ASEAN to the process of peaceful reform in Southeast Asia through a deft combination of peer positive encouragement and pressure cannot be overlooked.

The process of ASEAN’s expansion is not fully complete, however. ASEAN-10 did not foresee the separation of the Indonesian province of East Timor in 1999 and its emergence as the sovereign state of Timor-Leste in 2002. In 2011, coinciding with Indonesia’s chairmanship of ASEAN, Timor-Leste formally submitted its application for ASEAN membership. Since then, its application has been under review, and independent studies have been commissioned to examine the likely impact of admission on the three ASEAN Community pillars. Clearly, consensus on Timor-Leste’s admission to ASEAN is still absent. Notwithstanding the outcomes of the aforementioned independent studies, ultimately the decision will be a political one by each of the ASEAN members based on their own rationales and considerations. For Indonesia, Timor-Leste’s admission is of importance not merely to address a geographic anomaly — namely the exclusion of a sovereign state on the eastern half of the island of Timor within the vast Indonesian archipelago — but also to ensure that of all the various foreign policy orientation options Timor-Leste could pursue, the country becomes well-versed in the “ASEAN Way” of managing the region’s affairs and does not become dependent on extra-regional powers whose confluence of interests with ASEAN cannot always be guaranteed. Furthermore, in geo-economic terms, ASEAN has to address the likelihood that a prosperous and stable economic community throughout Southeast Asia cannot be sustained if it excludes Timor-Leste, and if extreme inequities exist between the latter and ASEAN member states. And not least of all, membership of ASEAN for Timor-Leste would help secure the remarkably close ties Indonesia and Timor-Leste have established since separation in 1999.

Moreover, though clearly not suggested to become members of ASEAN, given the indivisibility of peace and prosperity, the increasing connectivity of issues beyond Southeast Asia, it is important that

ASEAN deepen cooperation with at least two neighbouring states, namely Papua New Guinea and Bangladesh, and indeed with countries in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Oceans more generally. This would be in keeping with the general need for ASEAN to develop a more “Indo-Pacific” perspective than hitherto has been the case.

ASEAN’s contributions over the past fifty years — at the intra-Southeast Asia, beyond Southeast Asia and at the people-centric levels — have been anchored on a number of traits, including: unity and cohesion; cooperative leadership and partnership; transformative outlook; and recognition of the need to ensure continued and enhanced relevance to its peoples.

The gradual expansion of ASEAN to constitute the ASEAN-10 and the deepening of the nature and scope of its cooperation from an “Association” to a “Community” have been invaluable in reinforcing peace, stability and prosperity in Southeast Asia. However, in a world and region marked by permanent change, to avoid a sense of “drift” and to consolidate its relevance, ASEAN is challenged to be at the forefront in proactively initiating, shaping and moulding that change. The future challenge for ASEAN is not merely to promote unity and cohesion amidst the obvious diversity of interests among its member states, but also in fighting off a sense of drift, “business as usual”, malaise and diplomatic inertia. With the requisite political will, these are not insurmountable challenges and ASEAN can look forward to another five decades of contributions to regional peace, stability and prosperity.

NOTES

- ¹ ASEAN-10 here refers to the expansion of the ASEAN beyond its original founding member states in 1967 (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines) to encompass Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.
- ² SEATO members included Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, the United Kingdom and the United States.
- ³ Malaya, the Philippines and Indonesia.
- ⁴ Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines.
- ⁵ “Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia”, available at <<http://asean.org/treaty-amity-cooperation-southeast-asia-indonesia-24-february-1976/>>.
- ⁶ Thus, for example, prior to the “ASEAN Plus Three” process (ASEAN, China, Japan and South Korea), there was an absence of any cooperative framework among these three Northeast Asian countries.

Is ASEAN Due for a Makeover?

TANG SIEW MUN

By any measure, the Association of Southeast Asian Nation's (ASEAN) commemoration of its golden jubilee this year is missing its usual pomp and fanfare. The excitement and interest in celebrating this milestone is noticeably absent, and this is certainly a cause for concern. If ASEAN does not take itself seriously, why should the rest of the world? By the same token, if ASEAN does not see fit to make a “big deal” out of the 50th anniversary of its founding, why should those outside the region pay any attention to ASEAN?

That the ASEAN leaders did not affirm the importance of the golden jubilee at the 30th ASEAN Summit held in April 2017 was certainly a missed opportunity. Specific mention of this important milestone was filed away on page four of the chairman's statement instead of being the lead item. The run-up to 8 August — the date of ASEAN's formation through the Bangkok Declaration on that date in 1967¹ — has been lacklustre, although this might not necessarily be a bad thing as ASEAN is often criticized for form over substance. Less fireworks, singing and dancing might be a new and welcome sign of ASEAN's serious and workman-like side that has always existed but is a face that is rarely shown to the outside world.

In any case, ASEAN finds itself in a very different world today than the one it faced in August 1967 when its five founding fathers met in Bang Saen, Thailand to discuss the formation of a new regional organization. The founding fathers — Adam Malik, Tun Abdul Razak, Narciso Ramos, S. Rajaratnam and Thanat Khoman —

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would, in the first instance, be pleasantly surprised and delighted that ASEAN had survived for five decades. Secondly, they would have a hard time in understanding the complex and comprehensive forms of regional cooperation that ASEAN has fostered and led since its establishment. The Bangkok Declaration was only three pages long, compared to the lengthy thirty-four-page ASEAN Charter that was signed in Singapore in 2007. These ASEAN luminaries would have certainly frowned on the 1,000 over meetings that ASEAN convenes annually despite efforts to streamline these official engagements.

More importantly, with the Cold War threatening regional peace and stability, their foremost strategic priority was to secure Southeast Asia's independence, which meant keeping the major powers at bay. The declaration of the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in 1971 was a manifestation of this line of thought.² Fast forward to recent decades and ASEAN has reversed course. Instead of keeping Southeast Asia "free from any form or manner of interference by outside Powers", ASEAN's strategic imperative centres on keeping the major powers engaged in the region. For these leaders, the world has indeed turned on its head. Erstwhile enemies are now good friends, and, in the case of Vietnam, even joined the regional organization. Up until the 1990s, China was regarded as the "enemy" due to its support for communist insurgencies in parts of Southeast Asia but is today ASEAN's largest trading partner. The founding fathers practised their statecraft at the highest level with the single-minded tenacity to keep their respective countries free from communism. The ideology that used to cause much insecurity no longer divides Southeast Asia; indeed two ASEAN members are ruled by communist parties. ASEAN's founding *raison d'être* of anti-communism has been replaced by an inclusive doctrine that was made possible by the firm application of the norm of non-interference in the domestic affairs of its member states.

ASEAN's adoption of an inclusive doctrine has transformed the regional organization in two fundamental aspects. First, within the region, the drive towards inclusiveness meant opening ASEAN up to other Southeast Asian states. The enlargement process — which begun with Brunei (1984), followed by Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar (1997) and ended with Cambodia (1999) — altered ASEAN's DNA. The inclusion of the less developed economies made the development gap among the ASEAN member states a central regional issue, which tempered ASEAN's overall enthusiasm and pace for regional economic integration and its free trade agreement (FTA) negotiations with external parties.

From a political-strategic viewpoint, the close-knit diplomatic community among the original “ASEAN-5” countries, forged over more than three decades of interaction, soon gave way with the incorporation of the newer members’ interests and strategic worldviews. Some of these inevitable divergences were played out with dire consequences for ASEAN unity as evidenced by the Phnom Penh debacle in 2012, when the ASEAN foreign ministers failed to issue a joint communique for the first time in its history. These fissures were also played out in full view of the world in ASEAN’s failure to obtain a consensus view that instability in the South China Sea imperils regional peace and security. In theory, the probability of reaching a consensus decreases in tandem with the increase in the number of veto players. Consensus is more difficult to achieve in the absence of a unifying concept or threat to keep nationalistic tendencies in check to achieve a common regional goal.

Although ASEAN has institutionalized the innovation of the “ASEAN Minus X” formula in the ASEAN Charter to govern economic affairs, it is the political deadlocks and indecisions that are most in need for an urgent fix. Can ASEAN remain relevant if it continues to be hampered by consensus decision-making? The choice of holding fast to the consensus model to keep the peace and maintain unity instead of exploring other modalities of decision-making is a false one. An ASEAN that is united and held together by the thread of deafening silence would only push the regional organization closer to irrelevance. On the other hand, a super-majority model may generate more engaging and thoughtful discussions among the member states which can no longer hide behind the veil of their veto power. Unity forged by suppressing or ignoring the majority interest is at best a false proposition. ASEAN has been organized around the premise of consensus, which in itself is a highly idealistic aspiration, but it does not have effective mechanisms to deal with instances where ideals are not translated into reality. ASEAN works best when there is consensus but fares poorly in managing differences. In the long run, this failing would not only make ASEAN less effective, but would also have a detrimental effect in sustaining the interest and support of its member states. This may prove to be an existential issue for ASEAN as differences in political issues spill over to questions on membership obligations and trust within the regional organization.

Second, inclusiveness also has an external dimension. The founding fathers did not have any grandiose ideas of extra-regionalism and would have been content with keeping non-communist Southeast Asia free from the growing “red tide” at the height of the Cold War.

The end of the Cold War and China's rise changed these calculations. To be sure, Southeast Asia has always practised variations of open regionalism. Notwithstanding ZOPFAN, ASEAN welcomed the major powers into the region — as long as they did not cause harm. The most visible manifestations of its inclusive nature was the basing of US military forces in the Philippines, a state of affairs that only ended in 1992. In 1994, ASEAN established the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the first and only region-wide security dialogue forum which brings together all the stakeholders in the Asia-Pacific region, including Europe. The ARF was bolstered by the formation of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) in 2010 to establish formal linkages and institutionalized cooperation among the ASEAN members states with eight of its Dialogue Partners (Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea and America). Beginning from 2018, the ADMM-Plus will meet on an annual basis. The East Asia Summit (EAS), which was conceptualized as a leaders-led strategic forum, also serves to embed the middle and major powers in Southeast Asia. Cooperation on the strategic and security issues is complemented by a dense network of free trade arrangements. These efforts are critical for ASEAN's survival in two key aspects.

First, embedding the major powers within these ASEAN-led processes provides an equal opportunity for all parties to engage and collaborate with ASEAN and also among themselves, with the latter point helping to dampen the major powers' competitive instincts, which, if left unchecked, could cause regional instability and divide ASEAN. The "China factor" has become more important in recent years, and these multilateral approaches provide China an avenue to test out its leadership role in the region. A point that is often unstated due to its sensitive nature is the balancing role played by ASEAN multilateralism. Keeping the major and middle powers engaged in the region reduces the likelihood of the rise of a hegemon, which effectively keeps a check on China's rising influence in the region.

Second, ASEAN's continuing engagement with extra regional partners, especially in the economic sphere, helps to prevent a situation in which ASEAN member states would be over-dependent on a single trade partner. A diversified trade portfolio provides ASEAN member states with a wider berth to navigate through difficult positions with their trade partners. It also blunts the sharp edge of trade as a political weapon. Seen in a comprehensive context, ASEAN's inclusive diplomacy not only makes good political sense

but is also a critical part of its defensive mechanism to mitigate unfavourable outcomes.

ASEAN could work with external parties towards achieving positive sum outcomes and also to minimize negative effects, but it alone has to address internal challenges. One of the most important issues facing ASEAN today is the inherent contradiction between its foundation as an “association” and its declared achievement of a “community”. It is clear that the terminology of “association” refers to a partnership of ten member states to work towards agreed goals. Each constituent member of this association retains its sovereignty and is related to each other on the basis of equality. On the other hand, a “community” implies a higher degree of interdependency and the expectation that each member is a part of the organic whole. While the norm of non-interference would sit comfortably within the framework of an association, it might not do so in the context of a “community” where one party would have a direct stake in the well-being of the other and vice versa. The new framing of ASEAN as a “community” may require ASEAN to re-examine how the member states relate to each other. At the very least, ASEAN has to clarify the meaning and application of a “community”. How does it differ from the previous framing of an “association?” What does being in a “community” entail? What are the obligations and expectations of its member states?

The framing of ASEAN as a “community” also brings to the fore a long-standing sticking point for the regional organization. ASEAN has often been criticized as elitist and panned for its inability to reach out to the people. This state of affairs has not been for the lack of trying or effort on the part of ASEAN. It has taken on the “people oriented, people centred” notion as a guiding principle and taken strides to engage the ASEAN citizenry, including establishing mechanisms such as the ASEAN Civil Society, ASEAN Youth and ASEAN Business Advisory Council, all of which interface with the ASEAN leaders. In addition, individual ASEAN member states hold national consultations with stakeholders. However, ASEAN continues to be constrained by its intergovernmental modus operandi, which is unlikely to change in the immediate future. At the same time, the charges of ASEAN’s elitism have been unfairly concentrated on the regional organization when the onus is on the national governments to include its citizens in their national decision-making process. In all fairness, today ASEAN is at its most inclusive and open than any point in time during the last fifty years. While ASEAN has some distance to go before successfully rectifying the perception of

its elitism, it will continue the course of engaging a broader range of Southeast Asians.

The golden jubilee is cause for celebration but it is also an opportune moment for introspective reflection. ASEAN has evolved from its basic but important *raison d'être* of enhancing the member states' security by harnessing its collective strength and also in putting aside their intra-mural rivalries and conflicts. It took almost a decade before the ASEAN leaders felt the need to convene a summit and to establish a secretariat to help organize ASEAN's meetings and activities. Granted that ASEAN has done well and may have even outlived many of its sceptics and naysayers, but can it afford to rest on its laurels? The challenges that ASEAN faces today are even more perplexing and the stakes could not be higher.

Externally, ASEAN has to make adjustments to an increasingly fluid strategic environment that is made more unpredictable by US President Donald Trump's uncertain approach towards the region. At the same time, it is caught in China's embrace which provides ASEAN member states with economic benefits, but Beijing's tightening stranglehold on the region can sometimes leave ASEAN gasping for air. Can ASEAN member states continue to hedge their way out of this strategic conundrum? If not, what strategic options do they have?

Internally, ASEAN member states are facing the twin threats of rising nationalism which leads to lower interest to support and sustain regionalist agendas on the one hand, and the growing divergence of worldviews and strategic interests which have had a negative impact on ASEAN's cohesion and unity on the other. The old ways that served ASEAN so well in the past now seem less effective. ASEAN's biggest threat is the failure to recognize that the world around it has changed in fundamental ways that requires it to experiment and introduce tools that can withstand new crosswinds and strengthen its resiliency for ASEAN to chart its own future. The world has changed, and so must ASEAN if it is to remain relevant and survive.

NOTES

- 1 "The Asean Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) Bangkok, 8 August 1967", ASEAN Secretariat, available at <<http://asean.org/the-asean-declaration-bangkok-declaration-bangkok-8-august-1967/>>.
- 2 "1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration", ASEAN Secretariat, available at <<http://www.aseansec.org/1215.htm>>.

The ASEAN Charter Ten Years On

WALTER WOON

On 13 January 2007 the High Level Task Force (HLTF) on the Drafting of the ASEAN Charter held its first meeting on the sidelines of the Twelfth ASEAN Summit in Cebu, the Philippines. On 20 November 2007 this author had the honour to present the completed ASEAN Charter for signature by the ASEAN leaders at the Thirteenth ASEAN Summit in Singapore. The Charter was drafted in an inordinately short time — barely ten months elapsed between the first meeting in Cebu and the last meeting in Vientiane in October 2007.

The tight time frame for the drafting of the Charter meant that many things were fudged and left to be elaborated later. The aim was to get the building up and the façade nicely painted in time for the Summit, never mind that the plumbing was still in the process of being fixed. A decade on, ASEAN is still tinkering with the plumbing.

Boiled down to the essentials, the HLTF had three principal tasks: first, clothe ASEAN with a legal personality; second, establish a proper institutional framework; and third, ensure that there was a mechanism to enforce compliance with the multitudinous agreements, roadmaps, plans of action and declarations that sprouted like mushrooms after every ASEAN Summit and ministerial meeting.

The first task was a purely legal undertaking. The lack of a proper legal personality was a practical problem for ASEAN. Donors

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who were inclined to give money had no one to give to. For decades, the ASEAN Secretariat stood in as the recipient. However, for various reasons this was not entirely satisfactory, especially from the point of view of some would-be donors. The solution was simply to declare that ASEAN, as an intergovernmental organization, had a legal personality. The reference to ASEAN as an intergovernmental organization was deliberate and crucial. From the start there was to be no hint of supra-nationality. The idea of an ASEAN Union was dropped from the outset. The member states of ASEAN mostly had acquired sovereignty within living memory, and for some, independence had been hard won with blood and treasure. They were not going to compromise that sovereignty for anything. There was no desire for a Southeast Asian superstate. This has not changed in the last ten years. Observers who make glib and uninformed criticisms about the slow pace of political and economic integration in ASEAN should bear this in mind.

The second task was to put ASEAN on a proper institutional footing. ASEAN was not founded as an organization. In conception, it was a mechanism for the foreign ministers of the five founding member states to meet regularly in order to foster trust in a volatile region beset by war and Great Power conflict.¹ The organization developed in an ad hoc fashion over the course of time, evolving to meet new challenges and opportunities. As former ASEAN Secretary-General Rodolfo Severino put it, the institutions followed the substance.² After four decades, it was felt that the “ASEAN Way” of making things up as the member states went along was no longer satisfactory.

New organs were set up. The ASEAN Summit remained at the top; suggestions that this should be renamed were rebuffed. The old ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) of foreign ministers morphed into the ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) designed to organize the Summits (the AMM still meets annually as the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting to discuss foreign affairs). Three Community Councils were set up to coordinate the activities of the three pillars of the ASEAN Community: the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC); the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC); and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). For the sake of efficiency, a Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR) was also established and based in Jakarta.³

The Charter was supposed to put ASEAN firmly on the footing of a rules-based organization. Unfortunately, however, this was interpreted as requiring more rules. The CPR took on the role

of practically micro-managing the ASEAN Secretariat (ASEC) in the early years, even to the extent of overseeing human resource issues. One Permanent Representative (PR) told this author that the CPR was like the board of directors, with the Secretary-General only acting as Chief Administrative Officer. Considering that the Secretary-General at the time, Dr Surin Pitsuwan, had been foreign minister of Thailand while the PRs were mostly of ambassadorial rank, this was a source of some friction. Over the last ten years, a *modus vivendi* has been worked out and the CPR has settled into its niche. Nonetheless, much is still being done by diplomats based in the capitals, contrary to the avowed aim of setting up a CPR.

Coordination among the three communities has also not been entirely smooth. The idea was that the ACC would do the coordinating. In practice, however, this ran into resistance particularly from the economic ministers. The ACC is dominated by the foreign ministries, as is the CPR. The CPR is also supposed to cover all three communities, but in practice there are just too many meetings and not enough experts. This is not a problem that can easily be solved. For good or ill, the ACC and CPR will continue to be the province of the foreign ministries, which may not be conversant with what their colleagues in other areas are doing or planning to do. Rivalries between ministers and ministries in the home countries continue to translate into lack of communication in Jakarta. It is the nature of the beast; it cannot be resolved by reforming old institutions or creating new ones.

The Charter made things worse in one way: setting back the professionalization of the ASEC. The ASEAN Secretary-General (S-G) has always been a political appointee. Each ASEAN member state takes turns to nominate the S-G. How they choose is left to them. Mostly, the S-Gs have been career diplomats, the notable exception being Dr Pitsuwan, a politician who had been foreign minister of Thailand. The S-G was assisted by two politically-appointed Deputy Secretaries-General (DSGs). The Charter provided the opportunity to professionalize the ASEC by making the DSG posts non-political. Open recruitment would have allowed ASEC to develop a stronger core of long-term professionals. Instead, the HLTF chose — mostly upon the insistence of the newer member states — to create four DSG posts, to be held by different member states. As a sop to those who desired a more professional Secretariat, two DSGs are openly recruited while the other two are political appointees. The result is a five-headed hydra; at any one time five member states are “represented” at the apex of the ASEAN bureaucracy.

Theoretically, the S-G and DSGs are not supposed to promote the interests of their home countries. But when the incumbent is a member of a country's diplomatic service and has to return home after a three- or five-year stint, how independent can he/she really be? There is a further problem, which was not created by the Charter but was not fixed by it either: the S-G has no real control over politically-appointed DSGs. Their career advancement is not determined by the S-G, nor has he any influence over their next posting after ASEC.

The openly-recruited DSGs also pose a human resource problem. They are appointed for a three-year term, which may be renewed once. There is, therefore, a six-year term limit for a DSG; even then, there is no assurance of re-appointment after the first three years. This means that it is not possible to build a proper long-term career in ASEC. A person who works his/her way up to the rank of Director must then stop and reflect on his/her options for further advancement. If he/she chooses to put himself/herself forward for a DSG post, he/she will be out in six years. It may be shorter; there is no assurance that he/she will be renewed after three years.⁴ The five-headed hydra system also means that if, say, the S-G is Malaysian, no Malaysian can be recruited as a DSG. This is not a good basis on which to attract competent candidates to build their careers with ASEAN.

Finally, the Charter was supposed to establish a basis for the enforcement of the obligations taken on by the member states. To be blunt, it does nothing of the sort.

The failure to live up to promises was identified by all former Secretaries-General as the main problem besetting ASEAN. The Eminent Persons Group whose recommendations formed the basis of the Charter had suggested that there should be provisions for the ASEAN Summit to impose sanctions including suspension of membership in the event of a serious breach of ASEAN obligations. However, at the first substantive HLTF meeting in Siem Reap, this suggestion met with stiff opposition. The Cambodian delegation stated baldly that if there were to be provisions on expulsion there should similarly be provisions on withdrawal. The matter was referred to the foreign ministers, who instructed that no mention of expulsion, suspension or withdrawal should be made in the Charter. The most that could be agreed upon was that the ASEAN Summit would decide on how to deal with a member state which was in serious breach of its obligations. There the matter stands, ten years later. There is little prospect that this will change.

The HLTF was also instructed to create a system for dispute settlement. This was done, but the details were left to be filled in after the signing of the Charter. Preference was given to non-legal dispute settlement by good offices, conciliation and mediation. Some delegations, particularly Indonesia, wanted to stop there; but others pushed for a more formal system including arbitration. For economic disputes, the Vientiane Protocol on Enhanced Dispute Settlement Mechanism applies. Non-economic disputes were to be dealt with under a separate protocol, the 2010 Protocol on Dispute Settlement Mechanisms (DSM Protocol). Unfortunately, when the 2010 DSM protocol was negotiated the Indonesians got their way and the mechanism was defanged. Basically, if there is a dispute, the matter will be resolved politically by the ASEAN Summit unless the parties agree to arbitration. The DSM Protocol is not in force at the time of writing.

Lest it be thought that the Charter is an empty shell, it must be pointed out that much of what happens in ASEAN takes place beyond public view. It is like the Indonesian *wayang kulit*, where the public sees the shadows on the screen, but behind the screen the *dalang* (puppeteer) are working furiously to keep the narrative flowing. There are over a thousand ASEAN meetings a year, at all levels from the Summit downwards. This creates networks of professional contacts and friendships. The infamous ASEAN karaoke sessions have a serious purpose; they allow bonding among the participants, even those with the stuffiest stuffed shirts. The existence of a community spirit among ASEAN officials from the ten member countries has been attested to by those who have actually participated in such activities.⁵

To end on a positive note: war and peace. In 2008 a dispute flared up between Thailand and Cambodia over the temple of Preah Vihear. This had been declared by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to be Cambodian in 1962. Thai domestic politics inflamed the issue when Cambodia applied for Preah Vihear to have United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage status. Singaporean Foreign Minister George Yeo, acting in his capacity as Chair of ASEAN, organized a meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers in Singapore. The Thai foreign minister was pressured by his ASEAN colleagues to agree to a peaceful resolution; however, he could not persuade his government to agree. In 2011 fighting broke out in the area around the temple. This time Indonesia

was in the Chair. Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa, acting in that capacity, shuttled between Bangkok and Phnom Penh. He brokered a deal to place Indonesian observers on the ground between the parties, then went to New York to inform the UN Security Council (UNSC). The UNSC, which had more pressing matters to deal with than a minor border skirmish in Indochina, was happy to leave it to ASEAN. The Indonesian observers were never actually deployed, but the important thing was that the shooting ceased. In 2013 the ICJ confirmed that Cambodia had sovereignty over the area around Preah Vihear.

The Charter is an imperfect instrument, which is not surprising given the tight time frame within which it was drafted. It is an aspirational document rather than the proper legally-binding, comprehensive constitution that some mistake it to be. The HLTF was well aware of this. Provision was made for it to be reviewed five years after coming into force.

Another HLTF was established in 2014 to look into strengthening the ASEC and reviewing the ASEAN organs. At the April 2017 ASEAN Summit in Manila it was noted that the ASEAN Senior Officials' Meeting and the CPR are "considering factual updates and revisions of certain articles of the ASEAN Charter".⁶ The ASEAN Leaders "noted the direction the Ministers gave for a precise and cautious approach in this exercise taking into account the views and positions of all Member States". Given that the Charter was a compromise among the ten member states, it is not surprising that any review would proceed cautiously.

ASEAN will evolve; the only things that stop evolving are dead. The Charter will have to reflect the evolution of ASEAN. It is likely that the Charter will never be completed. Like the great Gothic cathedrals of Europe, the scaffolding will be in place for many years to come as construction work carries on above the heads of the congregation and visitors.

NOTES

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- ¹ The history of ASEAN is recounted in more detail in Walter Woon, *The ASEAN Charter: A Commentary* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2015).
- ² Rodolfo Severino, *Southeast Asia in Search of an ASEAN Community: Insights from the Former ASEAN Secretary-General* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), p. 23.
- ³ The most notable omission from the list of new organs was the ASEAN human rights agency. This proved to be the most contentious issue dealt with by the HLTF and negotiations nearly broke down over this. In the end the HLTF was instructed that the issue would be dealt with after the Charter was signed. Like Frankenstein's monster, the human rights mechanism remained a body without a name until the establishment of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) in 2009. See Woon, *The ASEAN Charter*, op. cit.
- ⁴ This was the fate of the DSG from Singapore S. Pushpanathan, who joined ASEC in 1996. He was appointed DSG for the ASEAN Economic Community in January 2009. After three years, Lim Hong Hin of Brunei took over. Pushpanathan then left ASEC and the organization was deprived of his experience.
- ⁵ This is lucidly explained in Chapter 5, Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffrey Sng, *The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017), Chapter 5.
- ⁶ Thirtieth ASEAN Summit, 29 April 2017. See para. 13 of the Chairman's Statement, available at <http://asean.org/?static_post=30th-asean-summits-manilla-26-29-april-2017>.

ASEAN and the Great Powers

JOHN D. CIORCIARI

For half a century the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has helped shape regional interactions with the Great Powers including the United States, the Soviet Union and a rising China. ASEAN has furnished spaces for diplomacy, spoken with a collective voice for its constituent members and generated regional norms and practices that incentivize and constrain Great Power behaviour. ASEAN's role in mediating Great Power relations has evolved considerably from its birth to middle age, as the dynamics among major external actors have changed and the degree of unity among its members has waxed and waned. In the Association's early years, Great Power politics spurred ASEAN towards stronger cohesion and effectiveness as members adapted to Anglo-American withdrawals and closed ranks to ward off the common threat of communism. Over time, a larger and more diverse membership and the centrifugal pull arising from Sino-American competition have made the task of building and maintaining unity within ASEAN increasingly difficult. After fifty years of efforts to stitch together a robust regional organization, ASEAN appears to be tearing at the seams.

ASEAN's creation in the wake of *Konfrontasi*, Singapore's break with Malaysia and Indonesia's abortive coup reflected its founders' understanding that division and discord left member states ripe for internal subversion and domination by outside powers. Singaporean

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foreign minister S. Rajaratnam captured this logic succinctly at ASEAN's inaugural meeting in 1967, when he quoted American founding father Benjamin Franklin: "We must all hang together, or assuredly we will all hang separately."¹ In that era, Great Power dynamics helped align the interests of ASEAN's founding members. Conservative governments in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand all faced threats of Chinese-backed communist subversion and concerns about falling dominoes should the United States withdraw from Vietnam. They differed on the extent to which they should facilitate US primacy in the region, but all had clear Cold War inclinations towards the West. They shared strong interests in managing their differences and fending off communist insurgents, which the Association helped them do by allowing them to refocus energies on domestic threats rather than those posed by their immediate neighbours.

ASEAN members also shared an interest in developing a regional layer of protection to insure against future US and UK disengagements from the region. They quickly had to put that insurance policy into effect, as the 1968 announcement of the planned British withdrawal "East of Suez" and the 1969 enunciation of the Nixon Doctrine signalled the coming Anglo-American retrenchment. That external shock prompted ASEAN members to draw closer together and issue a collective doctrinal response. In the 1971 declaration of a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), they pledged to pursue external recognition and respect for Southeast Asia as a zone "free from any form or manner of interference by outside Powers" and to enhance cooperation to build regional strength and solidarity.² From the start, this idealized vision of ZOPFAN was observed largely in the breach. ASEAN members supported, to varying degrees, the US war effort in Vietnam and accepted extensive American influence in the region. Still, the ZOPFAN principle expressed the essence of ASEAN's approach to relations with the Great Powers — attempting to hold them at bay while striving to strengthen the internal cohesion that underlies the Association's external clout and defences.

ASEAN's next major institutional step, the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, was largely a response to the US withdrawal from Vietnam and communist victories in Indochina. Alongside pledges of intramural cooperation, the Treaty asserted basic rules of the game for international relations in Southeast Asia, including: respect for national independence, sovereignty and territorial independence; freedom from external interference, subversion or coercion; and

commitments to the peaceful resolution of disputes and the non-use of force.³ Ever since, ASEAN's engagement with the Great Powers has involved efforts to draw them into this normative framework.

Although the US withdrawal from Vietnam contributed to ASEAN's development, it also complicated the Association's relations with external powers. Until 1975, all ASEAN members looked westward for military backing and enjoyed extensive political and economic ties to the United States and its core allies such as Britain, Australia and Japan. None had comparable relations with China or the USSR. Facing three communist states on its doorstep, and uncertain about the US security commitment, however, the Thai government opened a window to Beijing. For the first time, ASEAN members did not oppose extended Chinese influence in Southeast Asia uniformly.

As Sino-American rapprochement unfolded, the Sino-Soviet split widened, and Vietnam veered towards Moscow, some within ASEAN came to see the Soviet-Vietnamese axis as the prime external threat to the Association. That perception crystallized after Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978 and China's ill-fated military incursion to "teach Vietnam a lesson" in early 1979. ASEAN members nevertheless differed over how to respond to the perceived menace from Hanoi. Malaysia and Indonesia feared that by engaging China to help defend ASEAN's front line, Thailand was allowing the fox to guard the henhouse. In the 1980 Kuantan Declaration, they called instead for the strict application of the ZOPFAN principle and an end to Soviet and Chinese influence on Vietnam. The plan was roundly rejected in Bangkok, Hanoi and elsewhere.

ASEAN members regrouped around a strategy supporting a motley coalition of Cambodian resistance factions. As the conflict in Cambodia continued, ASEAN members generally welcomed resurgent US activity and accepted China's involvement. The Association played an important role, leading the diplomatic campaign to ostracize Hanoi and deny legitimacy to the occupation and the new regime in Phnom Penh. A united stand against the Soviet Union and Vietnam enhanced the cohesion of ASEAN, which welcomed Brunei as its sixth member in 1984, and showed the Association's capacity to inflict meaningful political costs, even on a superpower. Still, substantial Chinese and American roles reflected ASEAN's inability to apply the letter of the ZOPFAN principle. The closest approximation, then as now, was to promote a balance of external influence in Southeast Asia aimed at optimizing ASEAN members' autonomy, security and negotiating leverage.

The Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia and the end of the Cold War brought further external shocks and new opportunities for ASEAN. Two Great Powers pulled back, as the Soviet Union crumbled in 1991, and the closure of massive US bases at Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base in 1991–92 punctuated a drawdown of American forces. The strategic space they vacated gave ASEAN a chance to extend its writ, but also raised fears of a vacuum that a rising China or others could exploit. Beijing had built a measure of trust in Bangkok during the Cambodian conflict, but its frosty relations with other ASEAN members had only begun to thaw.

In response to the tectonic shifts at the end of the Cold War, ASEAN issued the 1992 Singapore Declaration. It expressed members' collective intent to "intensify cooperative relationships" with the United States, Japan and other US allies, but not China.⁴ After China passed a 1992 law claiming nearly the entire South China Sea, ASEAN conveyed its members' concern by issuing the Manila Declaration on the South China Sea, which urged parties to exercise restraint. At that stage, the Association could still speak with a relatively unified voice on matters concerning Great Power interests. The Singapore and Manila declarations helped legitimize steps taken by several member states — particularly Singapore — to facilitate continued US military primacy in Southeast Asia.

ASEAN members also plunged into the project of building regional institutions. This largely reflected an effort to engage, integrate and constrain external powers, channelling them towards desired areas of cooperation and into multilateral spaces where ASEAN members can pool their weights. The Association hung together closely enough to be courted collectively by the United States, China, the European Union, Japan and other external powers seeking local ownership and legitimation for regional initiatives. As bodies including the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) took shape, ASEAN was able to exercise or claim authorship and to earn a position at the core of the unfolding web of regional institutions. ASEAN's central position and legitimating authority helped its members adjust the balance of Great Power influence after a ham-fisted Western response to the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis showed the peril of relying excessively on the United States in particular. ASEAN invested with China, South Korea and Japan in ASEAN+3, and APEC's star faded. The 1997 crisis marked a watershed for ASEAN members' approaches to China, which began to earn recognition as a crucial economic partner and as a rising Great Power with regional responsibilities.

At the same time, ASEAN's composition was changing. The accession of Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia in the second half of the 1990s challenged the Association's sense of shared identity and the range of foreign policy orientations among its members. Myanmar's ruling junta had long looked to Beijing to lessen the brunt of international sanctions and isolation. The government of Hun Sen in Cambodia increasingly did the same after forcefully seizing power in 1997. Governance problems in all four states frustrated ASEAN's engagement with the United States and Europe, with Myanmar providing a roadblock to discussion of many region-wide initiatives. The US-led "war on terror" and invasion of Iraq following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks also complicated relations between ASEAN and the United States, as not all members shared that strategic priority, and some questioned the US approach — particularly in Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur. Economically, strategically and ideationally, ASEAN's collective external orientation blurred.

China's surging trade and investment in the region were welcome, as was the 2002 ASEAN–China Free Trade Agreement. Many ASEAN members remained wary of Beijing's strategic designs, however. In 2005, when China appeared poised to dominate the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN members helped orchestrate its expansion beyond the ASEAN+3 participants to include India, Australia and New Zealand. Reforms in Myanmar also facilitated more robust engagement with the United States as part of the Obama administration's "pivot" or rebalance strategy. In 2013, ASEAN co-launched an annual summit with the United States alongside its older summit series with China and Japan, each of which began in 1997. These ASEAN-level engagements have shown that Great Powers see value in engaging with the Association, not just with its members. Chinese accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2003 and America's accession in 2009 also reflected ASEAN's ability to induce Great Powers to pledge respect for regional norms — if not to comply with them consistently.

Despite these indicators of ASEAN's relevance to the Great Powers, internal fissures have undermined the Association's capacity to address the most obvious and serious contemporary challenge to regional peace and independence — China's advancement in the South China Sea. Sino–American competition in that arena and others has exacerbated the strains that accompanied the addition of ASEAN's four newest members. The ASEAN Charter represented an effort to forge a stronger union, but a legalistic pact could not

disguise members' divergent domestic political trajectories, economic dependencies and foreign policy orientations. For the governments in Cambodia, Laos and to a lesser degree Myanmar, China provides resources and political insurance at an acceptable price in diminished autonomy, beating any deal the United States can offer. In most other ASEAN capitals, doubts exist about whether US primacy is desirable or even possible as China gathers steam.

The South China Sea dispute has laid bare the mounting strains within ASEAN. China's de facto annexation of large contested areas and use of coercion to press its claims plainly violate the 2002 ASEAN–China Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea and the Association's more general norms pertaining to interstate conduct. However, ASEAN has been unable to speak decisively on the matter as some members cast vetoes in apparent gratitude or fealty to Beijing. The diplomatic brawl at the July 2012 ministerial meeting in Phnom Penh damaged the Association, both because it broadcasted the private diplomatic feud and because Cambodia was accused of breaching protocol to curry favour with Beijing.

The wedge within ASEAN has since deepened. In 2016, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi asserted that China had reached a "consensus" with Brunei, Cambodia and Laos that the feud in the South China Sea was "not an issue" between China and ASEAN and should not affect their relations.⁵ Following his electoral victory in May 2016, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's pledge to embrace China and spurn the United States tipped the balance within ASEAN further towards Beijing. After the ASEAN Summit in April 2017, a statement by the Philippine chair dropped even gentle references to China's reclamation activities in the Spratly Islands, instead citing "improved cooperation".⁶ The prospect of ASEAN playing a major role in the resolution of this Great Power issue is scant.

As ASEAN celebrates its 50th birthday, it enjoys the benefits of longevity. Established rules and practices give the Association a cushion of legitimacy, and after decades of investment in ASEAN, member states will not walk away from it lightly. Nevertheless, the Association faces perhaps the most serious challenge to its institutional integrity to date. Members are far from united on how the Association should address the rise of China or issues of contention between Beijing and Washington. The erraticism of President Donald Trump's administration has magnified regional doubts about US staying power, a perennial Southeast Asian concern, adding strategic uncertainty and further complicating the pursuit of

unified ASEAN positions. Unable to act in unison, ASEAN members are more vulnerable to being pulled apart, further from the ZOPFAN ideal. Without a greater degree of cohesion and collective foresight, ASEAN members may well suffer the ill fate that the Association's founders wisely sought to avoid.

NOTES

- ¹ S.R. Nathan, *Fifty Stories from My Life* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2013), p. 120.
- ² "Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration", Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 27 November 1971, paras. 1–2.
- ³ "Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia", Bali, 24 February 1976, art. 2.
- ⁴ Singapore Declaration of 1992, Singapore, 28 January 1992, para. 6.
- ⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, "Wang Yi Talks about China's Four-Point Consensus on South China Sea Issue with Brunei, Cambodia and Laos", 23 April 2016, available at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1358478.shtml>.
- ⁶ Chairman's Statement, 30th ASEAN Summit, 30 April 2017, available at <<http://asean.org/chairmans-statement-30th-asean-summit/>>.

A Tale of Two Institutions: The ARF, ADMM-Plus and Security Regionalism in the Asia Pacific

SEE SENG TAN

The Asia-Pacific region is served by not one but two region-wide security arrangements, namely, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and its newer counterpart, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus). Like their namesake and appointed custodian, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), both the ARF and ADMM-Plus lack the deeply institutionalized character of their Western counterparts and are not deemed as particularly effective mechanisms for conflict management and resolution. On the other hand, (and, importantly, regional aspirations aside), the institutional designs of the ARF and ADMM-Plus as principally mechanisms for dialogue and consultation essentially mean they are not created to facilitate ambitious forms of security cooperation, although theoretically they could evolve in the future and assume more complex and challenging responsibilities.¹

This article will sketch and assess the respective evolutions of the ARF and the ADMM-Plus, and briefly speculate on their future trajectories. Crucially, the historical achievement of these institutions has been their ability to convene and regularize political dialogue and consultation between ASEAN member states and the world's great

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and regional powers. However, the post-Cold War strategic compact that enabled this exceptional development has considerably weakened in the face of growing rivalry among the Great Powers, which has led to pressures on ASEAN member countries to take sides and fomented disunity within ASEAN itself. For the two-decade period following the end of the Cold War, out-and-out rivalry had been delayed or deferred; first thanks to China's adherence to Chinese paramount leader Deng Xiaoping's "bide our time" strategy and its "charm offensive" towards Southeast Asia, and by America's preoccupation with the so-called "global war on terrorism". However, since around 2009, with China's rising assertiveness and the US "pivot" or rebalance to Asia, the region's institutions have threatened to become arenas for Great Power sparring, as happened at the ARF in 2010 over the issue of the South China Sea as a "core interest" for the Chinese, and again in 2014 over island reclamations and militarization in the contested Spratly Islands, and at the ADMM-Plus in 2015 over an aborted joint statement which, if issued, would have included mention of the South China Sea.

That said, where the Dickensian analogy of twin cities (or institutions, for our present purposes) in trouble arguably falters is in the highly successful multilateral military exercises conducted under ADMM-Plus auspices, which have hitherto engendered considerable attention and commitment from all eighteen member countries. But it is early days yet. Furthermore, while common concerns over North Korea's recalcitrance have brought China and the United States closer together, whether their apparent mutual goodwill will extend beyond their current alignment of interests — and the ramifications of such strategic congruence for Asia-Pacific security regionalism — remains to be seen.

ARF: A Bridge Too Far?

The ARF was established in 1994 to considerable fanfare and with the declared aim "to develop a more predictable and constructive pattern of relations for the Asia-Pacific region".² Its current membership stands at twenty-seven: the ten ASEAN members; the ten ASEAN dialogue partners (Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia and America); one ASEAN observer (Papua New Guinea); as well as North Korea, Mongolia, Pakistan, Timor-Leste, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The ARF issued a concept paper in 1995 that laid out a three-stage roadmap on security cooperation that envisaged the institution evolving as a

mechanism from confidence-building to preventive diplomacy and finally to conflict resolution (amended subsequently, at China's behest, to "elaboration of approaches to conflicts"). The concept paper also introduced two "baskets" of measures: the first comprising so-called low-hanging fruits readily harvestable; the second comprising more ambitious and challenging activities. Modalities such as Inter-Sessional Support Groups and Inter-Sessional Meetings were formed to support the implementation of the ARF's goals.

However, progress proved painfully slow to achieve and the ARF was seemingly unable to evolve beyond the confidence-building stage. Differences arose between activist ARF members such as the United States, the EU, Japan, Canada and Australia who advocated the establishment of concrete preventive diplomacy (PD) mechanisms — such as early warning systems, fact-finding missions, enhanced good offices of the ARF chair for mediation — and those like China, Myanmar and Vietnam who were reluctant to move the ARF forward to PD for fear that their sovereignty might be compromised. Despite their adoption of the ARF Concept and Principles of Preventive Diplomacy in 2001, it took the ARF members another decade to agree to and issue a PD work plan in 2011. In any event, the definition of PD that finally passed muster was so conservative that one wonders why it could not have been achieved much and earlier if that was as far as the ARF was prepared to go on PD. Nor did it help that the ARF's rigid adherence to the consensus principle in decision-making — such that flexible consensus became replaced by a non-negotiable unanimity — came at the expense of progress. As this author has argued elsewhere, given an increasingly unwieldy institutional design and diplomatic convention, the ARF seems destined to fail.³

In the post-9/11 era, a practical dimension has been added to the activities of the ARF, chiefly in selected non-military or non-traditional areas such as anti-terrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), maritime security, non-proliferation and disarmament. This move has been welcomed by many as a logical step given that the Asia-Pacific region has increasingly played host to militancy, natural disasters and humanitarian crises, maritime disputes and the like.⁴ However, in so doing, and as a consequence of its assiduous avoidance of complex strategic challenges facing the region — including China-Taiwan tensions, North Korea's nuclear weapons programme, and territorial disputes in the East and South China seas — it could also be argued that the ARF has unwittingly disqualified itself as the region's primary platform for

security matters. Worse, the ARF plays second fiddle to the ADMM-Plus in the effort to implement practical cooperation since the former lacks the operational capabilities and dispositions apposite to the latter. Crucially, the widespread perception that the ARF had become irrelevant furnished the rationale behind proposals for a new regional security architecture to replace what some regard as an outmoded ARF, such as the “Asia-Pacific Community” idea introduced by the then Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2008, which the Southeast Asians rejected out of concern that ASEAN would be marginalized by any new architecture not built around it.⁵

ADMM-Plus: A Practical Regionalism?

The ADMM-Plus was inaugurated in October 2010 in Hanoi on the basis of papers endorsed by the ADMM. Its eighteen members include the ten ASEAN countries and Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea and America. It started off as a triennial arrangement but has become a biennial arrangement on the basis of a recommendation made by the sixth ADMM meeting in 2013. Not unlike the ARF, the ADMM-Plus is designed both as a mechanism for multilateral security dialogue and consultation as well as a framework for non-traditional security cooperation. To date, six areas of practical collaboration — namely, maritime security, counterterrorism, HADR, peacekeeping operations, military medicine and the most recent one, humanitarian mine action — have been mandated by the ADMM-Plus for its member countries. Expert working groups have been formed to facilitate efforts in each of those areas.

Since the inaugural ADMM-Plus in Vietnam in 2010, combined military exercises involving the grouping’s eighteen member countries have grown in frequency and complexity. The most recent ADMM-Plus exercise on maritime security and counterterrorism was held in Brunei and Singapore in early May 2016. A total of 3,500 personnel, 18 naval vessels, 25 aircraft and 40 Special Forces teams from all eighteen countries participated in shore-based activities in Brunei, in exercises that simulated maritime terrorist attacks in the waters between Brunei and Singapore, and in land-based exercises in northwestern Singapore. According to one defence minister of a participating country, the scale of both the 2016 exercises themselves and the keen political investments of all the member states constitute a “very clear and strong signal” that the ADMM-Plus takes maritime

security and the threat of terrorism seriously and is prepared to mount multinational efforts to maintain peace and stability in the region.⁶

That said, despite its accomplishments — indeed, the ADMM-Plus has gone further than any existing regional cooperative framework has hitherto achieved — member countries and their military establishments nonetheless face the prospect of participant fatigue and, should the ADMM-Plus prove incapable of managing tensions in hotspots like the South China Sea,⁷ low returns on their investments. But for its stakeholders for whom military-to-military exercises under the ADMM-Plus rubric have started to bear fruit, nothing could be further from the truth. Be that as it may, the defence forum has not been completely exempt from the troubles that have afflicted the ARF. For instance, at its ministerial meeting in November 2015 in Kuala Lumpur, as a result of intractable differences among its member states, the ADMM-Plus was forced to scrap a planned (but non-mandatory) joint statement on the South China Sea. At the time, it was widely (and wrongly) reported in the international press that the failure to issue a declaration was reminiscent of ASEAN's disunity in Phnom Penh in July 2012 when the organization also failed to issue a final communique because of differences over the Spratlys dispute. However, the key difference for the meeting in Kuala Lumpur was that all ten ASEAN countries — including the four ASEAN claimant states, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam — stood firmly united against the inclusion of the South China Sea in the proposed joint declaration, while ensuring its mention in the chairman's statement issued by Malaysia in its role as ASEAN Chair for 2015.⁸

Where is Asia-Pacific Security Regionalism Headed?

It is understandable why security regionalism in the post-Cold War Asia Pacific, as exemplified by the ARF and the ADMM-Plus, has been regarded as a “frustrated” enterprise.⁹ Despite the growing web of security ties and activities that criss-cross the region, the level of institutionalization therein remains relatively low, the scale of activities is limited and the scope of the mandates of regional arrangements is both narrow and weak. While the problems afflicting the ARF are not surprising given the primacy of sovereignty concerns and the trust deficits that characterize the region, the ARF's “recusal” from the management of the major strategic challenges affecting the Asia Pacific not only reflects the missed opportunities for the forum

to be a key security actor, but presumably exposes the ineffectual leadership of ASEAN in the face of rising Great Power rivalry. The good start hitherto rendered by the ADMM-Plus is a welcome contrast to the ARF, but the failure by the ADMM-Plus to produce a joint statement fostered the impression in the minds of some that it could go the way of the ARF. Fair or otherwise, it is concerns such as this that prompt the worry that the ADMM-Plus could end up as a “talk shop” that achieves little real progress. That said, the advantage afforded by these institutions remains their ability to convene confabs where rival states are not only given opportunities to interact but mutually engage in practical cooperation.

NOTES

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- ² “Chairman’s Statement: The First ASEAN Regional Forum Ministerial Meeting, Bangkok, Thailand, 25 July 1994”, US Department of State Archive, 25 July 1994, available at <<https://2001-2009.state.gov/t/ac/csbm/rd/4377.htm>>.
- ³ Ralf Emmers and See Seng Tan, “The ASEAN Regional Forum and Preventive Diplomacy: Built to Fail?”, *Asian Security* 7, no. 1 (February 2011): 44–60.
- ⁴ Jürgen Haacke, “The ASEAN Regional Forum: From Dialogue to Practical Security Cooperation?”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 22, no. 3 (September 2009): 427–49.
- ⁵ Tommy Koh, “Rudd’s Reckless Regional Rush”, *The Australian*, 18 December 2009, available at <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/rudds-reckless-regional-rush/news-story/69b186cd010b73769b0ab32f8f82b299>>.
- ⁶ Cited in See Seng Tan, “The ADMM-Plus: Regionalism That Works?”, *Asia Policy* 22 (July 2016): 73.
- ⁷ This point is made in the broader context of defence diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region, including the ADMM-Plus. David Baldino and Andrew Carr, “Defence Diplomacy and the Australian Defence Force: Smokescreen or Strategy?”, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 70, no. 2 (March 2016): 139–58.
- ⁸ See Seng Tan, “Claims of Asean Disunity at Summit Unfounded”, *Straits Times*, 26 November 2015, available at <<http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/claims-of-asean-disunity-at-summit-unfounded>>.
- ⁹ Deepak Nair, “Regionalism in the Asia Pacific/East Asia: A Frustrated Regionalism?”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 31, no. 1 (April 2009): 110–42.

The East Asia Summit and ASEAN: Potential and Problems

NICK BISLEY

For the past five decades, ASEAN has been the sole regional institution of substance in East Asia. During most of its existence, it was largely focused inward and on Southeast Asia. However, in the late 1990s that situation began to change. Asian states began to experiment with new regional mechanisms and processes, and ASEAN began to take a more expansive vision of its regional role.¹ These were at times complementary processes. The creation of ASEAN Plus Three (APT) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in the 1990s were the first elements of external engagement. The organization realized that in an increasingly interconnected East Asian region, the interests of its Southeast Asian members were going to be shaped more by events occurring outside the neighbourhood, and in particular by a rising China, than they were by intramural affairs. Moreover, it was these impulses — to devise useful institutional structures for a changing region and to engage the Great Powers in ways that retained ASEAN’s self-styled “centrality” — that led to the formation of the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005.

Although the sixteen-member grouping has considerable potential to play a leading role in the region, this has not yet been realized. Part of the reason is that the regional setting is now much more fluid and contested. But it also has to do with the fundamental tensions at play when ASEAN tries to shape the agenda in a grouping where

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it is outweighed by non-ASEAN members. This article explores these issues and argues that the ability of the EAS to realize the ambitions many have for it to be the peak body for regional collaboration is likely to be frustrated by Asia's increasingly contested regional order.

The EAS: Origins and Evolution

The EAS has a number of attributes that mark it out from other regional initiatives.² First, it has a “whole of government” remit. Unlike the ADMM-Plus — which is tasked with defence cooperation — or the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) process — which has an exclusively economic remit — the EAS is intended to advance dialogue and cooperation in all spheres with the lofty objective of “promoting peace, stability and prosperity in East Asia”.³ Second, it is a “leaders-led” process. While it is developing an embryonic institutional infrastructure, the EAS remains centred around a meeting of government leaders. This is in part about signalling the ambitions for the Summit to be the lead in the region, but also reflects the reality that, in statecraft, there are some things that only leaders can do. Third, its membership includes all the key countries central to East Asia's international affairs. APEC has been hindered by a too-rapid expansion whose overly diverse membership lacks sufficiently shared interests. The Pacific Rim conception of Asian regionalism of the 1990s now appears misguided.⁴

ASEAN, of course, is at the centre of the EAS. Indeed this remains an important attribute, even if it is the source of some internal tension. As we saw with Kevin Rudd's stillborn “Asia-Pacific Community” in 2008–9, efforts to advance regional multilateralism continue to require ASEAN support.⁵ Whatever one may think of ASEAN's organizational efficacy, it has shown great tenacity in protecting its self-appointed place at the centre of an emerging regional architecture.

It is this mix of policy remit, the level at which it meets, its membership profile and its relationship to ASEAN which gives the grouping considerable potential.⁶

Although established in 2005, the ideas animating the EAS have a longer history. Since the early 1990s, ASEAN leaders have been thinking about ways to better link the economies and societies of Southeast and Northeast Asia and create a broader sense of

community.⁷ Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad had called for an East Asian Economic Caucus in 1996. APT gave these ideas an institutional home. The new “plus three” process launched several initiatives to devise a programme to realize that ambition which culminated in the creation of EAS.⁸

While there was consensus within ASEAN and many of its partner countries about the benefits of the kind of higher-level dialogue and collaboration that creating an EAS would entail, there was significant division about who should be included. Some argued for a narrow conception of East Asia, essentially entailing the EAS evolving out of the APT, while others wanted a broader membership. This led to quite significant diplomatic wrangling in the lead up to the Kuala Lumpur Summit in 2005.⁹ Malaysia, under Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, led the case for the narrower conception, while a number of other ASEAN members and Japan argued for the inclusion of India, New Zealand and Australia. The main concern that this latter group had about the narrower membership was the risk that ultimately it would become dominated by China. The “ASEAN plus three plus three” formulation ultimately prevailed. By including a larger non-aligned power and two US allies, ASEAN members felt the EAS would not become a China-centred grouping, and would thus put ASEAN in a much stronger position.

However, the question of membership built into the Summit some significant challenges that hampered the institution in its opening years. China essentially disengaged from the EAS, preferring instead to use the APT to organize its approach to ASEAN and the broader agenda of region-wide cooperation and community building. Not only did China see APT as providing a better option for advancing cooperation because of its more limited membership, it also felt that the EAS reflected a Japanese conception of regional cooperation.¹⁰ Chinese reticence was also matched by US ambivalence towards ASEAN more generally and the EAS in particular. The failure of Washington and Beijing to take the EAS seriously in its early years badly limited the Summit’s ability to build a sense of community and strengthen policy coordination in the region.

As a result, from 2005 until 2011, while the Summit met every year and produced a range of interesting discussions and non-binding collaborative positions,¹¹ it never built up the kind of momentum or political significance to advance its larger ambitions or play a significant role in Asia’s international relations.

This began to change in 2011 when both the United States and Russia joined. Each did so largely for reasons to do with their regional ambitions and the signals that taking part in the Summit sent to East Asian countries. For Washington in particular signing the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, albeit with some opt out clauses, and taking a seat at the EAS table was a key part of President Barack Obama's "pivot" to Asia.¹² The Obama administration wanted not just to rebalance US policy away from its heavy emphasis on the Middle East, but also to make Asia the priority of US foreign policy more broadly. The strategy has been criticized as little more than a rebranding of existing US commitments, and while this was reasonable in some spheres, the pivot's strong multilateral engagement strand marked a distinct break with past practice. At the centre of that engagement was participation in the EAS. Russia's decision to join was also about signalling long-term strategic priorities. President Vladimir Putin's foreign policy was, and remains, about redeeming Russian geopolitical importance as a key Asian power. The participation of America and Russia also prompted China to begin to shift, albeit subtly, its approach to the Summit. While it continued to abjure active leadership, Beijing began to warm to the EAS which brings together three out of five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, over half of the world's population and GDP and meets annually at the highest political level.

With its broader membership reflecting Great Power interest and engagement finally set, the EAS' next key point of development was the 2015 Summit which brought about a number of subtle but significant institutional developments. Laid out in the "Kuala Lumpur Declaration" the members aimed to strengthen the EAS while retaining its informal "leaders led" identity.¹³ This involves three key ambitions. First, the members want to take steps to turn the broad aims of collaboration into actual cooperation. Second, they want to find a better division of labour among the region's institutional architecture. Third, they aim to have some kind of bureaucratic support to advance the work of the process and to maintain momentum between meetings. This entailed the creation of an EAS unit within the ASEAN Secretariat, and establishing a regular meeting of permanent representatives of EAS members to ASEAN. However, the EAS unit is small, the ability to advance substantive collaboration remains limited and the relationship between even ASEAN-centred institutional mechanisms remains difficult.

Potential and its Limits

By bringing together all of the key powers of an Asia that is increasingly interconnected, and doing so at the highest political level, the EAS significant comparative advantage in Asia's institutional ecosystem. Its political weight, the scope to build trust and forge a sense of common cause among all of the key states in Asia and its remit across the full policy spectrum, leads one to conclude that if the EAS did not exist we would be calling for its creation.

Yet the Summit is barely recognized outside a very narrow band of elites. Its ability even to capture the press in the way the APEC Summit does is limited by its scheduling in the midst of a packed Asian summit season, which in recent years has also involved G20 meetings crowding things out further. This lack of purchase on the public imagination reflects not only difficulties with diaries but the political reality of a cooperative mechanism whose contribution to regional affairs is in reality very thin.

Part of the reason for the Summit's inability to play a more significant role in the region relates to one of international politics' underlying realities. To succeed, international institutions need to have the support, explicit or tacit, of the Great Powers. Here the EAS has been unfortunate. In its first six years the two most important, America and China, were largely indifferent to its existence. Yet as they have become more interested in the institution, the broader geopolitical environment has become more contested. As Sino-American relations move from uneasy coexistence to more overt competition, this is having a dampening impact on the capacity of the EAS to advance regional collaboration. There is a slight chance that such a forum might be a place in which trust between Asia's behemoths might be forged, but thus far there is little evidence that either side is especially interested in pursuing this opportunity. It is not that they may not try to ameliorate their competitive tendencies, but they are much more likely to do this bilaterally and not in a multilateral context.

A second reason that the Summit is likely to continue to struggle for influence is its lack of capacity to advance a collaborative agenda or to act on decisions made under its auspices. While the small steps taken in 2015 are helpful in this regard, there remains a vast gap between at least some of the ideas being discussed among the members and their capacity to act on their decisions. There is an unfortunate cycle of underinvestment producing thin returns that, if

left unchanged, could further limit the appeal of the EAS. Indeed some have argued that one of the EAS's main attractions is also one of its limitations: it is a summit. Ultimately, the centrepiece is a relatively short meeting, derisively described by some as "dinner and speeches",¹⁴ which is jammed into an already packed diary of commitments.

Finally, there is the problem of expectations. As in other realms of politics, expectation management is crucial for ensuring the success of regional multilateralism. In a region like Asia — in which power is concentrated in the hands of a small number of very large countries, with a large number of much smaller countries in relatively peripheral positions — multilateralism is only ever going to be a relatively minor part of the international landscape unless the Great Powers allow it to play a greater role. Thus, one must have an appropriate sense of the kind of contribution a body like the EAS can make.¹⁵ Calibrating the expectations of the members — high enough to move forward on key issues, but not so high that they have unrealistic hopes that are dashed and then lead to disengagement — is extremely difficult. Thus far, the EAS has not been successful and will need to improve on this front to make a more substantive contribution to the region.

EAS and ASEAN in the Coming Decades

The EAS represents one of a number of ASEAN gambits to influence the wider Asian strategic environment and to try to bind the interests and behaviour of the region's major powers in ways that are conducive to its members' interests. Notwithstanding the Summit's ability to be attractive to the region's major powers, and paying lip service to the idea of ASEAN centrality, the experiences of the EAS are salutary for ASEAN over the coming decade. First, as the EAS shows, the ability of institutional frameworks to shape the international environment and not be shaped by it is limited. This is especially the case when the Great Powers do not get along. ASEAN's desire to remain the most important player in a grouping which includes India, China, America and Russia, among others, shows that even when unified, ASEAN's relative influence will be constrained. As such, it is likely that, as with the EAS, ASEAN is going to find the coming decades more difficult than the past.

A second issue of great significance to ASEAN over the coming years is the question of ASEAN centrality. Here I mean this both in the sense that ASEAN will remain at the centre of the region's

institutional architecture and central to the foreign policy thinking of its members. The international environment in Asia is binding the states and peoples of South, Southeast and Northeast Asia into a more integrated strategic and economic system, with China as its centre of gravity.¹⁶ The ability of ASEAN to remain institutionally central will be tested and the incentives of ASEAN member-states, particularly the larger states that are more linked into integrated Asia, to always put ASEAN at the centre of their international policy will be limited.

Yet all is not doom and gloom for the Summit. Indeed even though it reveals some of the tensions and difficulties facing ASEAN, the EAS retains its potential and, with good leadership and astute statecraft, a reformed and institutionally capable EAS may well provide a platform in which the ASEAN-10 can shape the behaviour of the powerful and retain the interest of its membership. However, it will take a greater level of engagement, more adroit diplomacy and a recognition that in an increasingly contested Asia, ASEAN may have to rethink just what it means to be at the centre of regional institutions. If it sticks to the dogmatic approach of the past, then the EAS may well end up as one of the many zombie institutions that litter the international landscape. But if ASEAN can creatively reinterpret the concept of centrality to reflect the strategic reality of contested Asia, there is a prospect that the EAS may have a profound and positive impact on the region's future.

NOTES

- ¹ Ellen L. Frost, *Asia's New Regionalism* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2008).
- ² For a detailed discussion of the EAS, see Ralf Emmers, Joseph Chinyong Liow and See Seng Tan, "East Asia Summit and the Regional Security Architecture", *Maryland Series in Contemporary Asian Studies*, no. 3 (202) (College Park, University of Maryland, 2010), pp. 22–46.
- ³ "Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the East Asia Summit", Kuala Lumpur, 14 December 2005, available at <http://asean.org/?static_post=kuala-lumpur-declaration-on-the-east-asia-summit-kuala-lumpur-14-december-2005>.
- ⁴ Nick Bisley, "APEC: Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation", in *Routledge Handbook of Asian Regionalism*, edited by Mark Beeson and Richard Stubbs (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 350–63.
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- ⁶ Nick Bisley and Malcolm Cook, “How the East Asia Summit Can Achieve its Potential”, *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 56 (28 October 2014), available at <http://www.iseas.edu.sg/documents/publication/ISEAS_perspective_2014_56.pdf>.
- ⁷ Tsutomu Kikuchi, “East Asia’s Quest for a Regional Community”, *Policy and Society* 25, no. 4 (December 2006): 23–35.
- ⁸ “Final Report of the East Asian Study Group”, Phnomh Penh, ASEAN+3 Summit, 4 November 2002, available at <<http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/asean/pmv0211/report.pdf>>.
- ⁹ Mohan Malik, “East Asia Summit”, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 60, no. 2 (June 2006): 207–11.
- ¹⁰ Kuik Cheng-Chwee, “Multilateralism in China’s ASEAN Policy”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 27, no. 1 (April 2005): 102–22.
- ¹¹ These were set out each year in the Chair’s statement, available at <<http://asean.org/asean/external-relations/east-asia-summit-eas/>>.
- ¹² Kurt Campbell, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia* (New York: Twelve, 2016).
- ¹³ East Asia Summit, “Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the Tenth Anniversary of the East Asia Summit”, available at <<http://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/November/10th-EAS-Outcome/KL%20Declaration%20on%2010th%20Anniversary%20of%20the%20EAS.pdf>>.
- ¹⁴ Cited in David Camroux, “Regionalism in Asia as Disguised Multilateralism: A Critical Analysis of the East Asia Summit and the TPP”, *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs* 47, no. 1 (March 2012): 97–115.
- ¹⁵ See Malcolm Cook and Nick Bisley, “Contested Asia and the East Asia Summit”, *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 46 (18 August 2016), available at <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2016_46.pdf>.
- ¹⁶ Nick Bisley, “Integrated Asia: Australia’s Dangerous New Strategic Geography”, *Centre of Gravity Series*, no. 31 (May 2017).

The Myth of ASEAN Centrality?

AMITAV ACHARYA

“ASEAN centrality” has become a prominent and perhaps fixed notion in the vocabulary of Southeast Asia’s and Asia’s international relations. But its origin is obscure and meaning unclear.¹ And there are misconceptions or myths about ASEAN centrality that need to be understood and clarified.

First, contrary to what many observers may think, ASEAN centrality is not an entirely novel or distinctive term. Rather it is related to a number of similar concepts: ASEAN as the “leader”, the “driver”, the “architect”, the “institutional hub”, the “vanguard”, the “nucleus”, and the “fulcrum” of regional processes and institutional designs in the Asia-Pacific region. A second popular misconception about ASEAN centrality is that it is about ASEAN itself. More accurately, it is really about the larger dynamics of regionalism and regional architecture in the Asia Pacific and even beyond. A third myth about ASEAN centrality is that it is the exclusive handiwork of ASEAN members — it is not.

Herman Kraft, a Filipino scholar, speaks of a “significant shift in the evolution” of ASEAN “from an association dedicated to keeping the Southeast Asian region free from being enmeshed in great power rivalries to one which accepted its ‘centrality’ in a wide East Asian and Asia-Pacific regionalism, a process that would entail accepting involvement of and engaging the major powers in the context of the region”.² Well put, but the very notion that ASEAN “accepted” its centrality implies that it did not necessarily create it.

At least not alone. ASEAN centrality is as much a product of external players in Southeast Asia as it is of the ASEAN members

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themselves. In fact, one suspects that its emergence had more to do with the dynamics of Great Power relationships than with any projection of ASEAN's internal unity or identity.

Taken together, the notion of ASEAN centrality has a number of inter-related dimensions. In its most direct and limited sense, ASEAN centrality means that ASEAN lies, and must remain, at the core of Asia (or Asia-Pacific) regional institutions, especially the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asian Summit (EAS). ASEAN provides the institutional "platform" within which the wider Asia Pacific and East Asian regional institutions are anchored. To put it another way, without ASEAN, it would not have been possible to construct these wider regional bodies.

A related meaning of ASEAN centrality is that ASEAN is the "origin" or the first viable regional grouping in Asia. ASEAN centrality also implies that Southeast Asia is at the "hub" of Asian regionalist debates and interactions over changing norms and mechanisms for regional cooperation in Asia, such as debates about non-interference and legalization. And lastly, although it may seem a bit of a stretch, in the minds of some of ASEAN's most ardent champions, ASEAN centrality means that ASEAN provides a "model" for other subregional groupings in the Asia Pacific and beyond.

In whatever way one might read it, ASEAN centrality is the most ambitious and elaborate projection of a subregional entity to a wider regional and global stage. It is certainly a far cry from the way its founders envisaged it. A survey of British documents of the period³ — and the British were a much more avid follower of ASEAN's initial years than any other Western power including the United States — shows that ASEAN's founders wanted to keep the grouping's role limited, even in the context of Southeast Asian affairs. They could not have imagined that ASEAN would one day acquire a "centrality" in the diplomacy and regional cooperation in the wider Asia-Pacific region.

Consider the views of one of ASEAN's founders, Singapore's Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam. His views on ASEAN's role and prospects were summarized in a diplomatic cable from the British High Commission in Singapore in the following words:

A.S.E.A.N. was an association of relatively poor and under-developed countries...What the organisation ought not to do was burden itself with responsibility for resolving the ideological, military and security problems of S.E. Asia. Economic problems alone would strain A.S.E.A.N. to the limit for many years to come. (Emphasis in British document).⁴

Yet, ASEAN has not only expanded its membership from the original five to ten members, but has also taken on precisely the kind of roles that Rajaratnam had warned it against taking, both in Southeast Asia and the Asia Pacific.

And these ambitions may be its undoing.

Even if one sticks to the narrow and direct meaning of ASEAN centrality that places ASEAN as the institutional anchor of Asia-Pacific regional architecture, it is not difficult to see the scale of the challenge ASEAN faces. Since the institutions involve other, and in some cases far stronger powers than ASEAN members singly or collectively, the idea of ASEAN centrality is from the start vulnerable to the vagaries of Great Power relations.

Lest one forgets, the emergence of the notion of ASEAN centrality came about after a rather unusually optimistic period in ASEAN's life, and reflected both the strategic and normative context of that time. After having bolstered its international credibility for its role in opposing Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia throughout the 1980s, ASEAN entered the post-Cold War era with a policy of engaging all the major powers of the world through a process of multilateral dialogues and institution-building, whose high points were the establishment of the ARF in 1994 and the EAS in 2005. During that period, ASEAN also completed its expansion to ASEAN-10, and despite (or rather provoked by) the temporary grief brought about by the outbreak of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, laid the foundations for its three communities: Economic, Political-Security and Socio-Cultural. The Great Powers, China included, were deferential to ASEAN and students of the "ASEAN Way".

Against this backdrop, the principle of ASEAN centrality had both strategic and normative purpose. Placing ASEAN at the centre of regional architecture served ASEAN's strategic interests by ensuring the relevance of ASEAN in the post-Cold War world. For the external powers, ASEAN centrality was a convenient and mutually acceptable way to engage themselves in Southeast Asia without raising the suspicions and opposition of its nationalistic governments and peoples. The Great Powers trusted ASEAN much more than they trusted each other (especially US-China, China-Japan and China-India). Hence it was hardly surprising that they would embrace the mantra of ASEAN centrality instead of attempting to create or lead regionalism on their own.

The normative purpose behind ASEAN centrality was closely tied to the notion of ASEAN's core beliefs and identity. This assumed that through its inclusive, open, and non-constraining brand of regionalism

based on the “ASEAN Way”, ASEAN could make the Great Powers “comfortable” with the ASEAN-led institutions as “deliberative forums” within which to engage each other in confidence-building, and generate a shared understanding of regional security issues that might limit their rivalry and induce strategic restraint and counter-realist behaviour in them.

Without these distinctive normative features of ASEAN, it is possible that the emergence of a multilateral security framework in the Asia Pacific in the post-Cold War era might not have emerged. Had any of the outside powers tried to build an Asia-Pacific regional architecture based on a non-inclusive (for weak states) security framework such as collective defence (e.g. an Asian NATO) or a Concert of Powers, or on an overly formalistic and constraining framework borrowed from Europe such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (as Russia, Australia and Canada had initially proposed), it is highly unlikely that China or even India would have joined. Herein lies the link between ASEAN’s normative identity and ASEAN centrality.

But this link and indeed the whole notion of ASEAN centrality is now facing serious challenges on multiple fronts. Four points are especially noteworthy.

The first and most important is diminishing intra-ASEAN cohesion. The catalogue of recent events that show a fraying of ASEAN’s unity are too well-known to require elaboration here. But one thing is certain: these are not the doings of China or any other outside power. ASEAN countries must bear the primary responsibility, and hence blame, for recent setbacks, especially disagreements over the South China Sea in 2012 that saw the Association failing for the first time in its history to issue a joint communique at its annual ministerial meeting in Phnom Penh.

To be sure, the expansion of membership and tasks has not helped. ASEAN’s transition to an economic community is highly creditable, but it has also taken on an ever-expanding menu of issues, political, security, ecological etc. This has not only imposed a growing burden on its limited institutional capacity, but also made overall collaboration more challenging. To compound matters, ASEAN members remain committed to non-interference, which makes national concessions more difficult to make for the sake of regional integration.

The induction of new members — Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999 — has made consensus-building more challenging, as some analysts had predicted. But

there is more to it. Domestic politics and regime security also play their part in weakening the member countries' commitment to intra-ASEAN unity.

Cambodia as a relatively new member might not have fully internalized ASEAN's core ideals but what about the Philippines? It was present at the creation of ASEAN and has been a major and positive contributor through the years. How then does one explain President Rodrigo Duterte's unsolicited pivot to China, which took Beijing by surprise? While geopolitical mis/calculation might have played a role, it also reflected his resentment against the Obama administration's criticism of his "war on drugs" campaign when compared to Beijing's more indulgent non-interference policy. Certainly, Duterte is not the first, and will not be the last, ruler on an authoritarian slope to court Beijing. But whatever his motives, his action compromised ASEAN unity and centrality (including the fruits of successful international legal arbitration on the South China Sea by his predecessor).

A second challenge to ASEAN centrality is its neutrality, which at bottom means not taking sides in Great Power rivalry. There can be no doubt that over the years, ASEAN has enhanced its credibility and effectiveness by playing the role of an honest broker. But this image has been eroded as US-China competition in Southeast Asia has heated up. Obama's courting of ASEAN as part of his "pivot" to Asia stoked Beijing's misgivings. China's growing economic clout enabled it to lure away members such as Cambodia and Laos (where regime security also played a part). The process is still unfolding, but it is clear that the principle of ASEAN's neutrality is unravelling. While both the United States and China continue to pay lip service to ASEAN centrality, their policies have chipped away at its principal corollary — ASEAN neutrality.

A third and related challenge to ASEAN is China's expanding vision of, and approaches to, regionalism. To put it simply, China has shifted from the pursuit of an ASEAN-centric regionalism in the 1990s (excluding the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, created in 2001) to one with multiple and parallel tracks. Today, China has a three-pronged approach to Asian regionalism. The first consists of ASEAN and ASEAN-led institutions, such as APT, ARF and EAS. Although China remains overtly committed to supporting them, it seems not to be very enthusiastic about the EAS.

Second, China has created a new institution, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The AIIB is a multilateral body with non-Asian members such as Germany, France, the United

Kingdom and Italy, and aims to play a critical role in infrastructure development that could significantly affect the future of ASEAN members; but the ASEAN members had no role in its creation and direction.

Third, and even more important, China's regionalism is increasingly China-centric. This comes with the hugely ambitious One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative and others like the Boao Forum and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). OBOR is especially important, given its size and scale. Although its success is far from assured, even a limited success could hugely impact existing regional cooperation. OBOR is essentially a system of bilateral cooperation, an economic version of the US hub-and-spoke alliance system. Great Powers usually favour bilateral deals with weaker states over multilateralism because the former gives them more leverage without giving the weaker side an opportunity to gang up against its interests. While the OBOR might intersect and collaborate with multilateral bodies like the AIIB and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), it is likely to be dominated by China and China alone. As some ASEAN countries get drawn into it, one might question whether they would also drift away from their own commitment to ASEAN centrality.

Last but not least, a fourth challenge to ASEAN centrality is the decline of the US-led liberal international order under President Donald Trump. While the decline of that order was anticipated well before Trump,⁵ his policies could accelerate its decline. Trump's rejection of multilateral trade agreements in favour of bilateral deals where America can have greater leverage, threatens ASEAN's norm of "open regionalism". Trump is unlikely to respect ASEAN centrality to the extent that Obama did. He is more likely to ignore, if not actively undermine, ASEAN.

In 2009, the then ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan said: "ASEAN centrality and leaderships need to be earned." He made a distinction between "centrality of goodwill" and "centrality of substance".⁶ The former has degenerated to mere lip service. In other words, the definition of Centrality must go beyond "form" — that is just being at the centre of institutional arrangements such as ASEAN+1, ASEAN+3, ARF and EAS — and provide the "substance" of centrality which includes setting the regional agenda, providing direction and resolving disagreements.

ASEAN during its half-century of existence has built a creditable record in fostering regional intergovernmental cooperation that only the most cynical observer can dismiss. ASEAN's role in developing

a nascent security community in Southeast Asia and socializing China and the United States, both reluctant entrants into Asian multilateralism, did not depend on brandishing any notion of centrality. But the concept of ASEAN centrality has been ambitious, ambiguous and impractical since gaining prominence around the mid-2000s. It has imposed serious burdens on ASEAN and raised expectations of its performance that the organization was not designed to meet. It is possible for someone, like this author, to be a firm believer in ASEAN but sceptical about ASEAN centrality. ASEAN has and will continue to have a critical relevance in dealing with issues in Southeast Asia that do not require the principle of ASEAN centrality in the wider Asia-Pacific security. The Association will survive the loss of ASEAN centrality. But if it wants to keep faith with the idea, then it must heed Pitsuwan's wise counsel that ASEAN centrality must be earned rather than simply assumed or proclaimed. Above all, there can be no ASEAN centrality without ASEAN unity and ASEAN neutrality. Unless ASEAN's members take this seriously and respond accordingly, the days of ASEAN centrality are almost certainly numbered.

NOTES

- ¹ For some of the first usage of the term "ASEAN centrality", see the documents of the 2nd EAS Summit, the 10th APT Summit, and the 12th ASEAN Summit, all in January 2007. These can be found in the website of the ASEAN Secretariat, available at <www.aseansec.org>. See also the ASEAN Charter for referring to it as the "primary driving force" of wider East Asian and Asia-Pacific regionalism.
- ² Herman Joseph Kraft, "Driving East Asian Regionalism: The Reconstruction of ASEAN's Identity", in *ASEAN and the Institutionalization of East Asia*, edited by Ralf Emmers (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), p. 63.
- ³ These documents are analysed in Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).
- ⁴ British High Commission in Singapore (paraphrasing S. Rajaratnam's view), to South West Pacific Department, FCO in London, 31 December 1969.
- ⁵ Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2014).
- ⁶ Surin Pitsuwan, "Building an ASEAN Economic Community in the Heart of East Asia", 2009, available at <http://www.ide.go.jp/Japanese/Event/Sympo/pdf/2009/surin_en.pdf>.

Mapping ASEAN's Futures

DONALD K. EMMERSON

The future of ASEAN is necessarily unknown. Its *futures*, however, can be guessed with less risk of being wrong. The purpose of this article is not to predict with confidence but to “pandict” with reticence — not to choose one assured future but to scan several that could conceivably occur. Also, what follows is merely *a* range of possible futures, not *the* range. The five different ASEANS of the future all too briefly sketched below are meant to be suggestive, but they are neither fully exclusive nor jointly exhaustive. Potentiality outruns imagination. The author's hope is that by doing the easy thing — opening a few doors on paper — he may tempt analysts more knowledgeable than himself to do the hard thing. That truly difficult challenge is to pick the one doorway through which ASEAN is most likely to walk or be pushed through — and to warrant that choice with the comprehensive evidence and thorough reasoning that, for lack of space and expertise, are not found here. That said, this “pandiction” does start with a prediction, and thereafter as well the line between speculation and expectation — the possible and the probable — will occasionally be crossed. In addition, by way of self-critique, the author's postulations may overestimate the importance of China in ASEAN's futures.

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Will ASEAN Disappear?

To the author's knowledge and recollection, none who witnessed ASEAN's creation in 1967 were optimistic enough to predict that it would live to celebrate its 50th birthday. Yet it did. By 2017, notwithstanding Philip Bowring's mock obituary,¹ the safest thing to say about ASEAN was that it would, in some form or another, continue to exist. Presumably inferring its tenacity from its age, not even the critics of ASEAN were pessimistic enough to anticipate its literal demise; even Bowring pronounced it merely irrelevant.

One can, of course, imagine it being dissolved. The diplomats and staff go home. The secretariat at Jalan Sisingamangaraja No. 70A in Jakarta is remodelled into a shopping mall. Could this occur? Yes. But will it? Assuredly not in the near-to-medium term, and probably not in the moderately longer-run future. Why not? Because too many unlikely things would have to happen first.

One of the unlikeliest is an eruption of contagious violence between ASEAN states, abetted perhaps by outsiders, that grows deadly and destabilizing on a scale large enough to destroy the Association. Although the past need not be prologue, no Southeast Asian states have gone to war with each other *while belonging to ASEAN*. Without predicting another half-century of intramural peace, one must acknowledge the hitherto durable absence of omens of inter-member war — intramural tensions, spats and occasional incidents aside. Certainly the existence of ASEAN has contributed to that irenic record. How, why and to what extent is debatable; correlation is not causation. But that ASEAN has fostered peace is recognized and valued by the region's elites.

That understanding shrinks the chance of a deliberate dismantling of the group by its leaders. Why get rid of a pretty good thing? Two of ASEAN's most ardent Southeast Asian fans have even argued that it deserves a Nobel Peace Prize,² and the case for such an accolade is at least stronger than the one that warranted the award's bestowal on President Barack Obama in December 2009. A cynic, of course, might attribute ASEAN's staying power less to its ability to preserve regional peace than to the opportunities it affords for its movers, shakers and speakers to jet around the region.

That said, one need not be a cynic to fault ASEAN for being an under-achiever bound by its "ASEAN Way" to honour consensus over consequence, process over product. One can counter that critique by noting that ASEAN was not authored to be, nor has it become, an intrusively supranational body. But that defence comes close to

implying a predetermined future and a corresponding dismissal: ASEAN will never become more than the sum of its sovereign parts, so why bother imagining otherwise?

The ASEAN Way does deserve credit. On the Association's 20th anniversary in 1997, a widely regarded Southeast Asianist, Michael Leifer, wrote that "ASEAN as a club cannot be expected to transcend itself in any supranational sense."³ Looking back with hindsight from the vantage point of 2017, that limit has nurtured longevity. Viewed through the eyes of its own diverse, divided and sovereignty-conscious members, a self-restraining if not self-marginalizing ASEAN has been and remains usefully innocuous. Insofar as its member states can imagine living without it, they see no harm in living with it. By this logic, the survival of ASEAN is due at least as much to its inoffensiveness as to its accomplishments. Or, to adapt Bilahari Kausikan's metaphor,⁴ ASEAN lives on because of what it is: a placidly stationary cow, not a contentiously purposive horse — let alone one being ridden by a Chinese, American or any other single rider in an altogether partisan direction.

This is not to deny that China's President Xi Jinping would like to use ASEAN, whether by milking the cow for its resources or by riding the horse along a New Silk Road towards realizing his expansionary "China Dream". Beijing has already been cultivating Phnom Penh and to an extent Vientiane as well, not to mention Chinese overtures to Kuala Lumpur and Manila. In doing so, China has begun exporting into ASEAN's ranks the self-censorship that it requires of its own people. The consensus-necessitating ASEAN Way already serves China's interests in forestalling criticism of its domineering actions in the South China Sea. Beijing knows that when the subject of the South China Sea comes up at closed-door intra-ASEAN meetings to decide the wordings of communiqués, it will take but one nay-saying Chinese proxy to protect Beijing's behaviour from direct textual harm. Nor are the other nine members necessarily less obeisant. The appeal and the fear of China together, albeit variably distributed across ASEAN's ten states, favour accommodation over critique let alone rebuke.

Five Possible Futures

So what will ASEAN become? Or, if wording the question this way imputes to the group more power to determine its own future than it actually has, what will become of ASEAN?

Among the many answers the question deserves, five come to mind: that in the years or decades to come ASEAN will resemble: (1) a facilitating auspice; (2) a specialized forum; (3) a coopted adjunct; (4) a maritime remainder; and/or (5) a centralized union. The “and/or” is necessary because the group could, over time, play more than one of these roles, and because some of their features may overlap as descriptors of ASEAN at the same point in time. As for the numbering, one could argue that, scanned in sequence from (1) through (5), each role differs more and more from what ASEAN is today, and that as those differences increase, the probability that ASEAN will actually play the role declines. But a convincing case to that effect would require more details than are offered here.

It is debatable, for instance, whether ASEAN's spatial amputation (4) is less radical and more likely than its structural transformation (5). Nor does sequence imply desirability: if the inclusion of ASEAN's present member states is valued most of all, other things being equal, a rump ASEAN (4) will look worse than a subordinated one (3) to which all ten still belong. But if ASEAN's autonomy is most desired, and all else is held equal, (4) is better than (3). Critics of ASEAN for whom its effectiveness matters most may impute to a centralized ASEAN (5) an ability to solve regional problems that the other four roles may lack. But that judgement presupposes evidence that centralization will not trigger pushback by member states so intense as to render ASEAN (5) even less effective than (1) or (2). Constrained by limited space, the sketches that follow largely omit such complications — the details in which, it is said, the devil resides.

(1) *A facilitating auspice?* Caveats aside, of all five futures, this one is the most like the present. A glance at the crowded calendar of past and prospective events on its website is enough to suggest that ASEAN today could be nicknamed “The Great Convener”. Roughly 1,000 to 1,500 gatherings are held under the group's aegis every year.⁵ But if ASEAN is a “talk shop”, its success in sponsoring discourse shows how robust the market for meeting and talking shop in Southeast Asia really is — not only among policy-minded locals but for their counterparts in the rest of Asia and, though less consistently or willingly, the rest of the world as well. The associational acronyms that ASEAN has generated encompass a panoply of committees and convocations, venues and outcomes, all in the name of international cooperation. Would Asia be better off without them? Not obviously, no. So long as the relevant actors

would rather talk than fight, and pending the rise of a rival auspice — China comes to mind — ASEAN may at least remain, in this first scenario, the region's go-to host.

(2) *A specialized forum?* ASEAN's futures implicate two important distinctions — sectoral and spatial. A sectoral emphasis would, for example, highlight ASEAN's roles vis-à-vis regional security on the one hand and regional economy on the other. In one such scenario, stymied by a combination of Chinese intimidation, American hesitation (if not indifference) and the consensus-requiring ASEAN Way, ASEAN relinquishes a security role in order to specialize in matters of regional trade and investment. Relevant issues in this reduced portfolio could include finalizing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, “organ harvesting” the Trans-Pacific Partnership and improving the ASEAN–China Free Trade Agreement and the ASEAN Economic Community. Concomitantly, ASEAN as a Political-Security Community would be de-emphasized, and ASEAN's already limited role in regional security would be ceded to, or sidelined by, outsiders — China acting alone or jointly with Russia, for instance, or perhaps a combination of Japan, India and a post-Trump America “re-pivoted” towards Asia.

(3) *A coopted adjunct?* This third future imagines China mattering more and more. If President Xi's tenure runs to 2022 or beyond, and China's political economy remains stable and strong, his China Dream could turn — return? — Southeast Asia into a tributary region. ASEAN's clientelistic purpose in that context would be to propitiate its Chinese patron while leveraging benefits from deference. The unlikely democratization of China need not change this scenario insofar as Chinese nationalism could be magnified by popular will. A Second Asian Financial Crisis triggered by turbulence in China's economy could, however, derail the process of cooptation pending China's recovery. In any event, cooptation would not deprive ASEAN of all autonomy. Much as the British Empire favoured “indirect rule” through traditional local institutions, China could try to inculcate in ASEAN a usefully intermediary role.

(4) *A maritime remainder?* When President Xi speaks of a shared Sino–Southeast Asian “community of common destiny”, he evokes the tyranny of proximity — spatial fatalism. America is far away, China is near and this will always be so; your only choice is to adapt. If Southeast Asia's proximity to China breeds comity, or at

least compliance, rather than contempt, Beijing can expect warmer future relations with its adjacent — subcontinental — neighbours, excluding Vietnam due to the strength of its identity and the historical record of its resistance to Chinese designs. By the same cartographic logic, China could expect cooler dealings with the sea-girt states to the south and east. In extremis, over time, ASEAN could cede its region's northern tier — Vietnam again plausibly excluded — to an emerging Sinosphere. The Association would be reduced to representing Southeast Asia's mainly maritime remainder. A plausible leader of that remainder would be Indonesia, equipped by its size and its majority Muslim faith to escape peacefully the deeper penetration and fiercer embrace that Beijing would have successfully levied on ASEAN's northern tier. In this future, conceivably depending on the outcome of another Sino-Vietnamese war, ASEAN could lose most or all of its mainland states to a nascent Greater China in a coerced "common destiny" after all.

(5) *A centralized union?* "Centrality" and "centralization" sound similar. But if centrality is about preserving ASEAN's role as the region's host, centralization is about empowering ASEAN to act. Because, as argued above, the ASEAN Way of consensus prevents the group from moving controversially beyond lowest common denominators, member states are less motivated to defect. That helps keep the Association together, which helps it maintain centrality in the eyes of non-ASEAN states that are willing to participate in gatherings under its inclusive and anodyne aegis. But if centrality is a matter of external diplomatic convenience, centralization controversially meets a disputed need for hard-to-do internal reform. ASEAN as a centralized union? It seems impossible. The member states do not want it because it threatens the national sovereignties that their respective leaders cherish, and because it upends the ASEAN Way of decentralization. Reallocating authority sharply upward and inward could even trigger a local version of the tumultuous would-be "Brexit" that has discredited centripetal Europe.

Supranationalization?

Would an existential crisis finally prove Michael Leifer wrong by shocking ASEAN into "transcend[ing] itself" in a "supranational sense"? Almost assuredly not. China's militarizing expansion in the South China Sea has not even prompted ASEAN's four claimant

states to settle their differences and adopt a common stance towards Beijing, let alone caused ASEAN's larger membership to unify against Chinese expropriation of the heart water of Southeast Asia. Even if China physically attacked and seized a land feature occupied by one ASEAN state, the other nine would likely not respond by collectively ceding authority for regional security to ASEAN. They would instead prioritize strengthening their respective national defences and their partnerships with powerful outsiders, including, for some, China itself.

In the coming years, the economic pull and political push of China will likely continue to divide and decentre ASEAN. Eventually, however, domestic concerns could turn China's attention inward, creating breathing room for Southeast Asia. ASEAN's ratio of trade with itself has long been stuck at between a fifth and a fourth of its total trade. Steady increments of complementarity among its member economies could, by raising the ratio, help make the "One Community" in ASEAN's motto less fictive, at least in a material sense. Rising inter-member trust could allow subsets of the ten — ASEAN minus X — to reach specialized agreements without offending the other members. If those agreements benefitted the region as a whole, gains in horizontal trust could incubate growing vertical trust in the authority of a strengthened secretariat to act on behalf of the entire group.

In 2011 ASEAN's Bali Concord III came close to suggesting the unthinkable: that ASEAN, in effect, develop its own foreign policy as a rules-based organization with a strengthened secretariat and a "common voice" able to articulate a "common platform" in world affairs. Notably omitted from the document was any reference to the ASEAN Way. Notwithstanding pressures from outside powers such as China and the United States, it is at least conceivable that a centralized future imagined in Bali in 2011 could eventually, against the odds, be achieved.

ASEAN is not Southeast Asia. The group has ten members; the region has 650 million. Of the above scenarios, which ones are most and least likely? Which ones would benefit those millions the most and the least? These presumptuous questions bypass the likelihood — the certainty? — that not one of the five futures sketched herein does justice to what will actually occur. No amount of scenario-spinning by outsiders will ensure a celebration of ASEAN's centenary in 2067. That will depend on the wise application of indigenous talent and energy to challenges and opportunities whose shape and

import cannot yet be known. As futurology turns into fact, what will matter is not the survival of ASEAN but the flourishing of Southeast Asia.

NOTES

- ¹ Philip Bowring, "Obituary: Association of Southeast Asian Nations (1967–2016)", *Asia Sentinel*, 29 April 2016, available at <<http://www.asiasentinel.com/politics/obituary-association-southeast-asian-nations/>>.
- ² See Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffery Sng, "Why Asean Deserves a Nobel Peace Prize", *Straits Times*, 26 March 2017, available at <<http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/why-asean-deserves-a-nobel-peace-prize>>, excerpted from their book, *The Asean Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017).
- ³ Michael Leifer, "Whither ASEAN?", *The Round Table* 76, no. 304 (1987): 482.
- ⁴ Bilahari Kausikan, "ASEAN is a Cow, Not a Horse", *The Middle Ground*, 6 October 2015, available at <<http://themiddleground.sg/2015/10/06/asean-cow-not-horse-bilahari-kausikan/>>; Donald K. Emmerson, "ASEAN between China and America: Is It Time to Try Horsing the Cow?", *Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 5, no. 1 (January 2017): 1–23, available at <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/trans-trans-regional-and-national-studies-of-southeast-asia/article/asean-between-china-and-america-is-it-time-to-try-horsing-the-cow/793AFAA432688BC8D57919C49195BD89>>.
- ⁵ Mark Beeson, "ASEAN's and Asia's Continuing Lack of Leadership", paper presented at the ISA International Conference, Hong Kong, 15–17 June 2017, p. 13; Catherine A. Traywick, "As New ASEAN Chair, Myanmar Braces for Year of 1,000 Meetings", *Foreign Policy*, 11 October 2013, available at <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/10/11/as-new-asean-chair-myanmar-braces-for-year-of-1000-meetings/>>.