

'There's No Way Like the ASEAN Way'

Earlier this year, the [16th Summit](#) of the [Association of Southeast Asian Nations \(ASEAN\)](#) took place in Hanoi, with the theme “Towards the ASEAN Community: From Vision to Action”. At the event, the Vietnamese prime minister – and chairperson of ASEAN 2010 – Mr Nguyen Tan Dung [called for](#) concrete steps and measures to accomplish the roadmap toward the [ASEAN Community](#) by 2015. Delivering his speech at the opening ceremony, Dung talked about how ASEAN had now become a closely integrated political and economic entity, an important player in the region and an indispensable partner of major countries and organizations in the world. But has it really?

The real message coming out of the summit was that ASEAN is still made up of 10 individual countries with their own problems. Unlike Europe, where political affinities and mutual defense needs are the glue of security co-operation, Asian states find common ground in their commitment to rapid, export-oriented economic development. Within ASEAN, [security is defined](#) comprehensively – the guiding concept being that each society’s development and internal stability will contribute not only to the state’s but the entire region’s security. They do not envisage a role for regional security cooperation in the containment and settlement of international conflicts, [preferring](#) bilateral negotiations and informal multilateral discussions instead.

1.1.1 Comprehensive security

One of the most striking aspects of Southeast Asia is its great diversity. Southeast Asian countries vary widely in terms of size, political system, economic development, cultural values and military capabilities. Despite this diversity, it is nevertheless possible to identify a number of common features that characterize the practice of security in most – if not all – of the region’s states.

The first and most basic feature is that the state itself is the primary security guarantor. Relatively recent liberation from colonial rule or semi-colonial status is among the reasons for the region’s [strong attachment](#) to the state. A second characteristic is that both the domestic and international arenas may be sources of insecurity for the countries in the region, while the third feature of Southeast Asian security practice is that governments articulate security in broad terms. The widely used expression ‘comprehensive security’ implies that security goes beyond the military to embrace the political, economic and cultural dimensions. The reason for this is that for most states, the core component of comprehensive security is still political survival. Finally, the fourth trait of the region’s security practice is that it is characterized by both competition and cooperation.

1.1.2 An 'ASEAN Way'?

Ever since its founding in 1967 by five of the 10 current members (Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore and Malaysia), ASEAN has had two overriding objectives: to build trust among the states of the region and to insulate the region from great power interference. The key to understanding the nature and regional role of ASEAN lies first in understanding that it was established as a conflict resolution mechanism rather than a vehicle for promoting security in any direct sense. This can be seen both in ASEAN's founding statement, the [Declaration of the ASEAN Concorde](#), as well as the 1976 [Treaty of Amity and Cooperation](#).

By emphasizing informal arrangements, and the preference for economic rather than military measures to produce security, ASEAN facilitates the avoidance rather than the resolution of conflicts. This approach, often called the 'ASEAN way', suited its five founding members, conscious of the vulnerability of their societies, where internal problems of ethnic and religious divisions often spilled over into neighboring states.

The principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states is the cornerstone of the '[ASEAN way](#)', and it is restated in virtually every significant ASEAN document. As well as fulfilling the association's internal purposes, the non-interference principle also contributed to the development of regional autonomy by providing a justification for the establishment and global recognition of the region. This recognition contributed to the external legitimization of the region's states and regimes and made it more difficult for outside powers to interfere in domestic affairs, while leaving open the possibility of having bilateral security relationships with outside states.

The second set of norms at the heart of the 'ASEAN way' form a distinctive style of decision-making that focuses on consensus-building through extensive consultation. Such consultations generally take place in a non-hostile setting, away from the gaze of the media and other states. This has two important effects: First, the nature of the negotiations allows officials from different states to get to know each other personally. Second, states proposing particular initiatives are able to anticipate what the reaction of other state leaders will be because of the extensive consultations and negotiations that precede its development.

The third set of norms that underpin the 'ASEAN way' is the non-use of force to settle international disputes. This principle was an important component in asserting the independence of the region's smaller states, provided a significant source of collective legitimization by freezing the region's borders and allowed state leaders to concentrate on internal consolidation. As a result the association has actually tended to work around conflicts instead of resolving them. This method of diplomacy has proven effective within ASEAN, but it has also exposed the limitations of its 'way' and the fragility of its structures.

1.1.3 An ASEAN Community?

While all of the region's governments are anxious to promote economic cooperation, only a few are willing to make defense commitments. It thus comes as no surprise that ASEAN is still not part of the general public's consciousness. An 'ASEAN identity' remains shallow and does not prevent member states from putting narrow national interests above regional ones. ASEAN, however, is

quietly making progress on the economic and financial front, successfully integrating its 10 countries, 620 million citizens and \$1.3 trillion economy. Today, over 95 percent of goods move between ASEAN countries without tariffs, thereby turning intra-ASEAN trade into the largest market for the region's members. At the same time, however, member states still shy away from further political integration – a testament to the enduring popularity of the 'ASEAN way'. A true ASEAN Community will remain a distant dream for years to come.

By Joav Ben-Shmuel

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1.1.4 Resources

International and Governmental Organizations

[Association of Southeast Asian Nations \(ASEAN\)](#)

ASEAN is a geopolitical and economic organization of 10 countries, which was formed on 8 August 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Since then, membership has expanded to include Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Its aims include the acceleration of economic growth, social progress and cultural development among its members, the protection of regional peace and stability and the provision of opportunities for member countries to discuss differences peacefully.

[ASEAN Plus Three \(ASEAN+3\)](#)

ASEAN+3 is a forum that functions as a coordinator of cooperation between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the three East Asian nations of China, Japan and South Korea.

Further official [ASEAN sites](#).

Research and Academia

[East-West Center Asia Pacific Bulletin](#)

The East-West Center contributes to a peaceful, prosperous and just Asia Pacific community by serving as a hub for cooperative research, education and dialogue on critical issues of common concern to the Asia Pacific region and the US. The Asia Pacific Bulletin (APB) publishes short articles, analysis and opinion pieces, as well as summaries of conferences, seminars, and visitor roundtables.

[S Rajaratnam School of International Studies \(RSIS\)](#)

RSIS is an autonomous research institute at the Nanyang Technological University. It conducts research on security and strategic and international issues; provides general and graduate education in strategic studies, international relations and international political economy; promotes joint and

exchange programs with similar regional and international institutions; and organizes seminars and conferences on topics salient to the strategic and policy communities of the Asia-Pacific region.

[Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies \(IPCS\)](#)

The IPCS is an independent think tank devoted to studying security issues related to South Asia. Over the years, leading strategic thinkers, academics, former members of the civil services, foreign services, armed forces, police forces, paramilitary forces and members of the media have been associated with the institute in its endeavor to produce a comprehensive framework for security studies – one which can cater to the changing demands of national, regional and global security.

[Council on Foreign Relations \(CFR\)](#)

The CFR is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization, think tank and publishing house with extensive holdings on the topic.

Media

[South East Asia News](#)

News coverage on Southeast Asia.

[ASEAN Affairs](#)

ASEAN Affairs presents news and background information about ASEAN.

[The Straits Times](#)

The Straits Times is one of the region's oldest English-language daily newspapers.

Please see also our keyword on [ASEAN](#).