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Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is the “oldest” surviving regional organization in Asia. Founded in 1967 at the height of the Cold War and regional tensions, ASEAN began as a project to promote confidence building among its founding members so as to enable them to band together and present a united front against potential external interference. Security concerns were the main driver towards informal cooperation among the members.

At the time of its formation, ASEAN was scoffed at by many political observers, both in the region and beyond. This was against the backdrop of many earlier failed attempts at regional cooperation, such as SEATO, ASA, and Malphilindo.¹ In a region

1. SEATO – The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization was an organization for collective defense initiated and supported by the US to block communist gains in Southeast Asia. It was generally considered a failure because of internal disputes and was formally dissolved in 1977. The Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) comprising Malaya, Philippines, and Thailand was formed on the initiative of then Prime Minister of Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman. It aimed to use regional cooperation on economic and cultural matters to strengthen Southeast Asian countries and defend them from the dangers of communist insurgency and outside intervention. However, the organization became defunct a year later after the dispute over Sabah between Malaysia and Philippines led to diplomatic ties being severed between the two countries from 1962-66. Malphilindo comprising Malaya, Philippines, and Indonesia was formed in 1963 on the behest of then President of Philippines Macapagal as a consultative forum but also became defunct when relations between Malaya and the Philippines soured.

marred by war and intra-regional conflicts, it was difficult to believe that the leaders of these newly independent, sovereign states with different historical experiences would have the political will to overcome suspicions and latent hostilities and engage in mutual consultation and deeper cooperation. Indeed, the twin obstacles to greater collaboration – suspicion and anxiety – remained and, for these reasons, ASEAN proceeded initially at a very slow pace, a pace that was comfortable for all.

Since then, ASEAN has come a long way and has played a not so insignificant role in supporting regional security. Through various ASEAN-led regional security architectures such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), and ADMM Plus (ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand, the US, and Russia), its centrality has been acknowledged by various major powers, though in the last few years, this has been increasingly challenged because of the growing assertiveness of China especially with regard to the territorial claims in the East and South China Seas. Tensions have been further heightened as the US “pivot” towards Asia was viewed by some in China as a US attempt to expand its influence in the region. Within this tense regional framework, ASEAN has been criticized for being ineffectual and failing to bring about a grand bargain between the major powers in the region. The lack of formal institutions for crisis management and inability to speak in one voice has often been singled out as one of the key weaknesses of ASEAN.

This paper will chronicle ASEAN’s approach towards regional security, discuss some of the security architectures in the region, and conclude by offering a prognosis on whether ASEAN would be able to maintain its centrality and be the driving force in maintaining peace and stability in the region.

ASEAN’s Comprehensive Approach toward Security

In its early years, ASEAN looked at security from the state-centric lens of territorial integrity and the traditional concept of national security. Security was viewed within a realist framework of deterrence and balance of power, and the member states placed a high value on state sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention. However, with the ongoing democratization process within the region, and the increasing role played by the epistemic community, civil society activists, and non-governmental organizations, the concept of human security is finding its way into the security discourse in the region. More importantly, the many transnational challenges ranging from the Asian financial crisis, the environmental haze from burning forests in Indonesia, the terrorist bombings in Bali, the outbreak of SARS, to the Indian Ocean

tsunami all happening within a short decade catalyzed the increasing acceptance of the human security discourse.²

Despite the growing prominence of the human security discourse and the concept of a people-centred ASEAN being introduced in the push towards the building of an ASEAN Community by 2020, for many policy makers in ASEAN, human security is primarily understood as “comprehensive security.” The concept of comprehensive security was introduced during the Cold War era in ASEAN. This concept emphasized a holistic view of security that includes both military and non-military threats, yet it does so in relation to the overall well-being of states.³ The core component of comprehensive security is still linked to the realist framework of “political survival” and “state preservation.”

It is therefore not surprising that ASEAN, in trying to establish regional security, has pursued a very pragmatic approach in engaging and drawing in major powers into the region to ensure balance of power. For instance, when Vietnam invaded Kampuchea in 1978, ASEAN had no qualms working with communist China to contain then Soviet-backed Vietnam. ASEAN’s fear of being dominated by any great power has led it to initiate forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in the immediate post-Cold War world.

ASEAN-led Security Architectures

The end of the Cold War and the rise of China introduced uncertainties in the strategic environment and was a matter of concern for several ASEAN member states. Riding on the increasing confidence which came after the decade-long sterling economic growth of its member states, ASEAN began to speak of the need for a wider Asia-Pacific forum that could address some of the fears and uncertainties of a region in flux. In 1994, the inaugural ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting comprising 18 countries (the ASEAN 5, Australia, Canada, China, the European Community, India, Japan, Lao PDR, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Russia, South Korea, the US, and Vietnam) was convened. The ARF was conceived initially as a political and security dialogue forum for traditional security issues, with the focus on confidence building first, moving towards preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention at a later stage. However, influenced by developments and discourses on human security in the international arena, ARF began to move beyond traditional security issues to

2. Yukiko Nishikawa, “Human Security in Southeast Asia: Viable Solution or Empty Slogan?” *Security Dialogue* 40, no. 2 (2009): 217.
3. David Capie and Paul Evans, *The Asia-Pacific Security Lexicon, 2nd Edition* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), 64-75.

focus more on transnational security issues such as disaster relief and humanitarian assistance and other non-traditional security issues.

To accommodate the rise of India and bring it into the ASEAN framework, and to mitigate the increasing tensions between Japan and China in the period 2004–2006, the East Asia Summit (EAS) was launched in 2005 comprising ASEAN plus China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand. As Sino-US rivalry heated up, the US was also brought into the EAS framework in 2011 as “a useful supplementary means of encouraging the US and China to develop a constructive and predictable pattern of relations.”⁴ Even before this, ASEAN had sought to bring all major regional powers into the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting, underlining an open, inclusive approach towards the management of regional security. The broader multilateral ADMM Plus Eight meeting took place for the first time in Hanoi in October 2010, and the agenda was carefully focused on non-traditional security issues such as disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, maritime security, and counter-terrorism in order to prevent the meeting being marred by the rising tensions over sovereignty claims in the East and South China Seas.

All these various frameworks reaffirmed the central role of ASEAN in any regional institutional initiative and stressed that the ASEAN way emphasizing “respect for independence and sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs of member states, consultation and consensus and moving at a pace comfortable to all parties” should be respected.⁵ US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in a speech immediately following the entry of the US into EAS, acknowledged the “central role of ASEAN” and also expressed the US desire to see EAS emerge as “a forum for substantive engagement on pressing strategic and political issues, including nuclear non-proliferation, maritime security, and climate change.”⁶

ASEAN’s Centrality under Siege?

However, of late, ASEAN’s solidarity and ability to drive the regional processes, and consequently its centrality, have been increasingly questioned.

The external environment of ASEAN is much more complex today as compared to the Cold War era. Internally, with ASEAN’s enlargement to include Vietnam,

4. Bilahari Kausikan, “Washington, Beijing Groping to Find a New Equilibrium,” *The Straits Times*, June 11, 2014.

5. Ralph A. Cossa and Brad Glosserman, “More the Same, Three Times,” *Comparative Connections*, January 2011.

6. *Ibid.*

Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, the diversities that were already a hallmark of ASEAN have further multiplied.

The most serious challenge to ASEAN's international standing since the Cold War has been its inclusion of Myanmar as a member.⁷ The internal situation in Myanmar worsened with the violent crackdown on protests by the monks in 2007 and the humanitarian disaster unleashed by Cyclone Nargis in 2008. The internal politics of Thailand wreaked further havoc to the unity of ASEAN, as political parties tried to shore up their "nationalistic credentials" by picking on the unresolved disputes with Cambodia over the sovereignty of the area surrounding the Preah Vihear temple. The cancellation of one of the ASEAN Summits in Thailand in 2008 due to clashes between opposing political groups, and the border skirmishes between Thailand and Cambodia that erupted in 2010 and went on for almost a year, shattered the carefully restored image of ASEAN in the years leading to the drafting of the ASEAN Charter. ASEAN was again seen to be faltering, unable to deliver on the "political and strategic coherence required for the unity of will and purpose necessary for it to be an effective actor in the regional international order."⁸

This disunity and lack of leadership in ASEAN came at a time when the strategic and economic environment in the Asia-Pacific was undergoing major shifts in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008-9. A faltering, distracted ASEAN led to the increasing assertiveness of China in the South China Sea and rising tensions between China and the claimant states in Southeast Asia.

It was also during this laggard period of ASEAN that external partners began to question the effectiveness of "ASEAN-centered" regional architectures and there were calls for new architectures such as the concert of powers suggested by the Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, or an exclusive East Asia community – similar to the European Community – proposed by the Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama. The rising tensions between the two key powers, the US and China, and the US "pivot" towards Asia eclipsed ASEAN's "claim to centrality in the Asian regionalism."⁹ These challenges to ASEAN's centrality were partly answered by Indonesia's skilful chairmanship of ASEAN in 2011, injecting a sense of urgency towards community building and promoting an activist agenda for the bloc. However, whether ASEAN can continue to lay claim to its centrality is uncertain. ASEAN's unity and hence centrality was tested again in July 2012, when it failed to issue (for the first time

7. Lee Jones, *ASEAN, Sovereignty and Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 180.

8. Donald Weatherbee, "Southeast Asia and ASEAN Running in Place," *Southeast Asian Affairs 2012*, edited by Daljit Singh and Pushpa Thambipillai (Singapore: ISEAS, 2012), 3.

9. *Ibid.*, 5.

in its history) a joint communiqué at the conclusion of its 45th Foreign Ministers Meeting, due to internal differences over how to handle the South China Sea issue.

ASEAN has no doubt helped to create “a minimalist normative bargain among the great powers in the region” through various ASEAN-led regional frameworks.¹⁰ The bloc’s comparative advantage is that it is universally acceptable as the driver of regionalism in a situation in which the great powers are suspicious of each other. ASEAN currently occupies a central role in the Asia-Pacific, particularly in East Asia, because of “the unique qualities of the East Asian environment in which ASEAN operates.”¹¹ The major powers in East Asia, Japan and China, do not trust each other because of historical reasons and because of ongoing tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. The Asia-Pacific also constitutes a “unique security environment” with major powers (the US, China, Japan and, to some extent, Russia and India) competing with one another for influence. These rivalries have created “a political space within which ASEAN may exercise significant regional influence” and enhance its own strategic importance. However, whether ASEAN can “exploit this advantage is partly contingent on the organisation’s internal unity.”¹²

So far, ASEAN has been able to maintain a central role in the various regional architectures by default because the major powers in the region have abstained from leadership for fear of arousing the suspicion of their rivals. However, as the US and China step up their competition in the region more openly, there is a real risk that ASEAN’s cohesion will come under further pressure. ASEAN has to move from “centrality of goodwill” to “centrality of substance.” This means that it has to increase its political and economic weight by building a successful ASEAN community, and, at the same time, enhance its external relations with all major powers to show its ability to continue to drive the various regional architectures. Otherwise, it will find itself being increasingly challenged and undermined.

What Lessons Can be Drawn from ASEAN’s Security Cooperation?

The much more homogeneous Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a very different entity from ASEAN with all its diversities. While GCC is fundamentally internally driven, ASEAN is externally focused. The different regional environments in which

10. Evelyn Goh, “Institutions and the Great Power Bargain in East Asia: ASEAN’s Limited ‘Brokerage’ Role,” *International Relations of the Asia Pacific* 11 (2011): 373-401.

11. Shaun Narine, “ASEAN in the 21st Century: a Skeptical Review,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 22, no. 3 (September 2009): 370.

12. Ibid.

GCC and ASEAN operate in present different challenges. However, both have taken a state-centric, comprehensive approach towards security and face an increasingly volatile and uncertain external environment. The lessons that GCC can distill from ASEAN arise from the following observations:

ASEAN's cooperation has been guided by norms that are designed to engage the big powers in the region, in particular the adherence to the principle of sovereign equality and non-interference, cooperative security, and the non-use of force. ASEAN has made a virtue of these international norms embodied by the UN because it is cognizant of its own weaknesses in a region dominated by the big power players – the US, China and the Soviet Union. Intra-ASEAN relations amongst member states as big as Indonesia and as small as Singapore similarly rely on the principle of sovereign equality and non-interference to keep the peace.

The pragmatic approach that ASEAN took in crafting regional architectures to underpin its security is commendable. In an environment where there is a deficit of trust, the step by step cautious but yet open and inclusive approach, recognizing the interests of every parties and taking care to accommodate the different interests is fundamental for any progress to be made. Without this constant vigilance and openness towards understanding each other's interest and focus on confidence building, ASEAN would not have succeeded in bringing competing powers and adversaries together in its various regional frameworks. Of course one could also criticize that in order to achieve some sort of break-through or leap in cooperation, there is a need to be able to make use of critical junctures, seize the moment and made a leap of faith. The trials and tribulations that ASEAN went through reflect the fundamental truth that progress can be made only when there is convergence of interest and internal unity and coherence. It is only through the exercise of astute diplomacy that ASEAN is kept intact despite the centrifugal forces that at times seem to threaten to tear it apart. To survive in an increasingly uncertain and volatile external environment, one needs to be both agile and flexible on the one hand and build resilience on the other. ASEAN has shown itself to be flexible but will need to deepen its cooperation to become more resilient to external shocks. The need to constantly evaluate and respond to changes will be an important factor in keeping ASEAN, and for that matter, any regional organization, relevant for its members.

Conclusion

The role of ASEAN in stabilizing great power relations was an important point in 2010 as the US stepped up its engagement in Southeast Asia and appeared willing to employ the various multilateral forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum

(ARF) to promote its national interests. ASEAN certainly wants the US to remain engaged and committed to the region's security and is happy that the US under the Obama administration has put new emphasis on Asia and ASEAN. However, it is also unwise for ASEAN to be overly dependent on the US, and it certainly does not want to give the impression that it seeks for the US to contain China.

ASEAN thus has to manage the likely tensions between China and the US in the various regional forums with great skill and tenacity. It would need to have plenty of diplomatic dexterity to manage the increasing strategic competition between the two powers and strike a careful balance, as friction between them would complicate broader regional dynamics. As Aileen Baviera noted "recent tiffs between China and Japan, China and Vietnam, and China and the US concerning the status of disputed islands and waters in South and East China Seas possess significance quite distinct from disagreements of the past. More specifically, previous contests amongst coastal states for sovereignty, fisheries, energy resources and maritime navigational rights continue to exist, but they are now overshadowed by the rivalry among major powers in pursuit of the broader goal of establishing and expanding strategic influence."¹³

As the US and China seek a new model of great power relations and work towards a new *modus vivendi*, ASEAN may find itself increasingly sidelined. This does not mean that ASEAN will have no role at all, but it would be a much more passive role, and ASEAN-led forums will only be supplementary tools rather than critical factors in the emerging Sino-US relations and overall peace and stability in the region.

13. Aileen Baviera, "Territorial Disputes in East Asia: Proxies for China-US Strategic competition?" in East Asia Forum, November 27, 2010, www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/11/27/territorial-disputes-in-east-asia-proxies-for-china-us-strategic-competition

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