



The Dynamics of Regional Cooperation in Southeast Asia

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Executive Summary

The need to establish a proper security structure in the Asia-Pacific Region is often underlined by Western political observers. But the chances for such a structure appear to be much smaller than generally accepted. The reason lies in the very different social structures and dynamism of Asian countries in comparison to European counterparts. ASEAN is a good case in point to show why and how these social conditions may have an influence on the building of a security structure and how they may influence its functioning once it really sees the light of day.

Independent of the great powers acting in the region, an institutionally stronger security network comparable to the European OSCE, for example, cannot really be imagined for the Asia-Pacific region. This is partly due to the fact that trust in this kind of structure is lacking. Asian culture focuses much more on the flow of reality and not on its static perception. Furthermore, much stronger in-group / out-group differentiations in the region create considerably higher obstacles for the creation of such a network. And once in existence, it must be much looser than a Euro-American structure due to the unacceptability of outside intervention.

The third problem for the creation of a stronger security network in the Asia –Pacific region is the different interests of the three main powers in the region, the US with their Japanese ally and the PRC. As long as the main players are not clear about their own bilateral relations, it will be impossible for geo-political imperatives to strengthen the security network in the region.

On the other hand, this short paper also shows that the current security set-up is basically working. However, when it comes under strong pressure in critical situations, the “Asian way” of doing things all of a sudden shows certain weaknesses. But the chances to counteract them with a more stringent security organisation are very small. Asia will have to live with the current security set-up.

Introduction

Cooperation efforts in Asia have multiplied since the end of the Pacific War. With the growing importance of the Asian region in the world economy and in world politics these efforts start to have global implications. Asia has received the political weight to be taken more seriously by leading American and European actors, as well as through cooperation efforts among Asian nations themselves. Nowhere is this more evident than in the cooperation structures in East and Southeast Asia where the US and Europe have tried in the last decades to get a foothold in regional dynamics. But so far the consequences of this increased weight of Asia are not quite clear to Europeans and Americans. Having the geo-strategic challenges of the region in mind, they often suggest an Asian OSCE to strengthen cooperation in the security domain. But social structures and dynamics in the region are very different. If there were to be efforts towards such a collective security structure the way to reach it, as well as the result of the efforts, would be very different from an OSCE. Western misunderstanding is essentially based on insufficient assessments of intercultural differences and a lack of understanding of Asian social and political dynamics.

Part of the problem is also created by the fact that studies based on cultural differences seem to be politically unacceptable. The attitude goes back to the historical link between cultural differences and defamation of non-Western cultures. Being different from a Western white person meant to have a lesser level of culture. The “noble” native in Western literature of the eighteenth century was mostly gone in the nineteenth and twentieth century. He or she had been replaced by the term “primitive” and was accompanied by a lack of acceptance or even disgust. Difference had become defamation. But without understanding cultural differences we shall not understand each other. There are no shortcuts into global understanding. Without understanding local structures and dynamics and the differences they present, we will be unable to understand ourselves in a global world, let alone understand the others in our new, global environment.

Another key element is the fact that specialisation in the field of intercultural studies has reached a point where interdisciplinary efforts like those necessary for intercultural understanding have become very difficult. We tend to lose the overview necessary for an understanding of globalisation. When we make an effort to understand, it is usually limited to a particular aspect of a phenomenon. We can't see the forest for the trees.

So the basic difficulties in understanding “Asian values” still remain. With the strong development of the Japanese economy, enthusiastic Western researchers of the Japanese miracle developed the notion to highlight with the comparatively slow economic developments in Europe and the USA. But Asian dynamics were only seen as forward dynamics. Furthermore, the differences between dynamics in Western and Eastern developmental patterns were never really made clear. Ezra Vogel's “Japan as Nr One: Lessons for America” (1980) is a typical example of the view and Chalmers A. Johnson “MITI and the Japanese Miracle”

(1982) insisted on the role of the government in this development. Envy was also part of the picture and its result can be seen in Bill Emmott's "The Sun Also Sets" (1990), predicting the fall of Japan, as many authors had done before him as well. Sooner or later, all these predictions are correct as the cycles of development are hardly ever directed towards eternal growth patterns.

A very similar picture can be found in assessing the rise of China. The analysis may be somewhat more cautious because of negative views about the Communist one-party system, but admirers can be found as easily as the critics who saw and see the Chinese downfall for tomorrow. The general picture is very similar to the one that accompanied the growth of Japan. A solid evaluation of Asian values has therefore never really been undertaken. Most of the texts are based on facts that have phenomenological origins. The understanding of the social background that could provide indications about social differences between cultures is usually lacking. But contrary to what one finds in most academic literature, these differences exist and must be taken seriously. They will create the real challenges of the 21st century, especially in the security field. One key to understanding them is provided by social dynamics in a mass society. When everybody in these East Asian mass societies feels that growth is there and has an impact on personal life, then social and economic shifts can be very rapid. But when the general mood is no longer positive, a strong lethargy marks the atmosphere in a mass society. Japanese development between 1990 and 2010 is a good example and has often been described as the lost decades. In the strongly individualistic US society, such a long economic downturn would have been used by many persons to realise new ideas. The lack of individualism in East Asian societies, however, practically prohibits this kind of reaction, explaining the long period of extreme difficulties in Japan. With the two lost decades of Japanese developments, these supporters of Asian values have come under pressure and the reaction in the West was coming very rapidly, criticising the whole value debate. What should have been done was to look more closely at these Asian values, getting them right rather than denying them outright. It is because of Asian values that things go the way they do. Western value structures will obstruct rather than help an understanding of developments.

Asia is posing the first real challenge to Western civilisation since Polish, Austrian and Russian troops defeated the Ottoman Empire in the 17th and 18th century. The dissemination of Western civilisation has not been put into question since the retreat of the Turkish armies. Only now, with the phenomenal growth of influence of East and Southeast Asia, a new challenge to the cultural supremacy of the West has started to develop. What we do not seem to have realised so far - or underestimated at least - is the fact that this challenge will be far-reaching, including value and behaviour patterns with which Western societies are not familiar. In the 21st century, they will create strong challenges to Western civilisation itself. The view that by developing socially and technologically, these nations will

follow a Western path in values is hardly justified. The growth of a middle class does not automatically mean that democratisation is the next step – and even when it should be it will certainly appear in different forms from European or American examples.¹ Even the use of technology that has been developed in the West will not lead to uniform societies. The closeness of collective social patterns will not be broken by the introduction of technical structures. Although these societies will also have to give greater attention to the individual, the developments will not lead to Western rights and freedoms. Their emphasis will remain on social closeness and security provided by the family and the community rather than relying on the state. On the other hand, the state will take charge of general social or economic questions in a way that does not correspond to Western liberal ideas. State influence is not limited to setting the frame in the economic field, as Japan had done in the second half of the 20th century. The individual has never detached himself from the state as in Euro-American cultures. Government responsibility and intervention will cover all the fields of social activity.

Accompanying this under-evaluation of Asian challenges is an overrating of the possibilities of organisational developments between East and Southeast Asian nations by Western observers. These nations are still seen as lagging behind Western development. Their economic upsurge is seen as a catch-up action that must lead in due course to stronger regional cooperation. But this is not necessarily the case. The regional structure may be different from Western organisational forms and may therefore never lead to cooperation results comparable to Western structures. The emancipation of these nations in a globalised world has made them more self-conscious. They will start to use and spread their own cultural patterns worldwide and will create real problems for Western feelings of cultural supremacy. This text looks therefore at the need and the growth of cooperation efforts in East Asia with a special focus on Southeast Asia and tries to evaluate developments along political and social lines of their own in order to obtain a clearer picture of cooperation tendencies in the Asian region.

1. Geopolitical and Economic Background to Asian Cooperation Efforts

A historical view of cooperation efforts in Asia is quite revealing. It allows for a more precise assessment of the scale and results of these efforts. Key to the understanding is the fact that many Asian nations were decolonised only after the Second World War. In order to evaluate Asian cooperation efforts it is thus necessary to dig deeper into the past of the region. A short historic view is unavoidable to understand what happens today and to be able to assess the potential for dialogue and further cooperation – not to speak of integration.²

1.1. There are a few fundamental facts that are of importance when looking at Asian countries, their politics and their economic potential. The first concerns the different political, social, and economic backgrounds to these dynamic developments.

After the Second World War, Southeast Asian countries were in the process of recovering from the war, and quite a number of them went through decolonisation, with all the difficulties resulting from these efforts lasting well into the second half of the last century. The results of the Pacific War were essential for these developments as the Japanese invasion had lifted the yoke of Western domination. Japan had, however, her own intentions for these countries within the envisaged Greater South East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere when her troops entered Southeast Asia as a “liberating” force in quite a number of Western colonies. Furthermore, the behaviour of Japanese occupational troops had a lasting effect on the local population when countries were not treated with appropriate respect, for instance in the case of the Philippines.

In the economic field, colonisation in Southeast Asia had meant that the basic agricultural heritage was hardly changed. The colonial powers were primarily interested in natural resources and in agricultural products. Wider economic development was not the aim of European colonisers. At the time of founding ASEAN in 1967, its members had more or less the same economic structures, making it quite difficult for the organisation to develop stronger economic ties among its members. Politically, the struggle over the consequences of independence was still going on, accompanied by a substantial number of inherited territorial disputes among ASEAN members. Economically, the founding members of the organisation were in competition with each other, having a comparable level of development and producing more or less the same agricultural goods.

It is therefore not exaggerated to say that the formation of ASEAN was basically due to the will of the founding members to secure independence of the region from the influence of external powers and to keep territorial disputes of members under control and not let them flare into open war. In this field, ASEAN has been quite successful up to today. But a number of these disputes have survived and do not make cooperation among the members any easier. Other territorial demands like the Vietnamese claims over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea were brought into the picture by the enlargement of ASEAN later on. The existence of these internal territorial disputes are one of the key reasons why ASEAN has great difficulties in finding a common position in relation to Chinese demands in the South China Sea.

The difficulties in the field of political cooperation led, as in the case of the European Union, to a concentration on economic and social issues as a first step towards closer political cooperation. The fact that the economic background of the member states was

quite comparable explains why ASEAN did not see any rapid development in the first two decades of its existence. Politically, the problems were put aside; economically, the base was too similar to have an immediate impact on intraregional trade patterns.

1.2. From the start, post-war political developments also had their impact on Southeast Asian cooperation. The divide between the socialist and the capitalist world influenced early cooperation efforts. The different start-ups of regional cooperation document this influence particularly well. Some of the political and strategic organisations had the aim to counter the surge of communism in Asia, others tried to create a bloc against old colonial and capitalist powers. But in all these early regional efforts, territorial disputes led to their end. ASA, the Association of Southeast Asia, formed in 1961, failed because of territorial demands between Malaya and the Philippines concerning Sabah and Sarawak. MAPHILINDO was set up in 1963, but broke up partly over the same issue before it could even start to function. Another element that was underrated at the creation of some early regional structures was the inherent will of the regional members to have no outside power back it in a predominant way. SEATO, pushed essentially by the US and their allies against growing communism in Southeast Asia met its fate due to the abhorrence of Southeast Asian nations to a new and strong presence of any foreign power in the region. Regional leaders were in agreement that Southeast Asia should not become a playing field for outside powers again.

1.3. A second set of factors of influence have their roots in the individual histories of regional actors. Japan's economy industrialised very early, basically with the second wave of European industrialisation, in which Germany and Switzerland can also be counted. The economic structure of Japan is thus comparable to European nations. This level of economic development created the base for Japanese victories in the Russo-Japanese War at the end of the 19th century, leading Japan to become the first non-Western colonial power by occupying parts of Manchuria.

China, on the other hand, was a late-comer. The last decades of the Qing dynasty in the 19th century were characterised by forces opposing any opening and any economic development. After the fall of the Qing Empire in 1912 and the founding of the Republic of China, internal fighting prevented sustained economic development and allowed Japan to extend her colonial grip, pushing economic take-off for China well into the second half of the 20th century.

Many Southeast Asian nations had just gained independence or were still fighting for it immediately after the Pacific War. Thailand was the only country in the region that was not colonised or occupied by foreign forces. Economic structures in the region were still strongly agrarian and interregional trade was underdeveloped. Other members of ASEAN

were under communist rule at the moment of its foundation. There was no impetus to integrate them into the Association at the end of the sixties, the height of the Cold War. The fall of socialism in Eastern Europe finally changed the picture and allowed their accession. Politically, however, they have remained socialist and thus add another dimension to the regional organisation and to its functioning.

Under these political circumstances, the establishment of regional cooperation structures would have to follow different paths than if they were in a Western environment. But there are even more important underlying elements for such a conclusion when looking at social behaviour patterns and different thinking modes in Asian societies.

2. Psychological and Social Explanations to Asian Cooperation Dynamics

Asian societies have not gone through social developments comparable to the European Renaissance and Enlightenment. Asian persons have not detached themselves from the natural and social environment. Proximity still marks these societies. Detachment has never taken place to the extent we find in a Euro-American environment. This difference from the Euro-American culture has a few very important consequences on the level of perception. Expressed in a very basic way, we could say that Europeans and Americans have become observers of their environment whereas Asians are participants in it. Results of this difference can be observed both in behaviour and in thinking patterns.

2.1. On the behavioural side, the fact that the persons have remained part of their groups is at the origin of a number of important characteristics. The group is therefore still placed before the individual. The “family” feeling becomes the key element in Asian behaviour patterns. But “family” needs to be defined on different social levels, starting with the key family and growing vertically into the social structure. For a city mayor, the city represents his or her family and for a provincial governor, his or her province. Secondly, they have not distanced themselves from the state either. The state is still regarded as the body responsible for the well-being of the whole society – but to a much larger extent than would be the case in a European nation. Chalmer Johnson’s designation of Japan as a developmental state stresses the particular role of government as a guiding body in economic development. Administrative guidance is the key characteristic of government influence. But the notion of administrative guidance is not restricted to the economy alone; other social sectors are equally ruled with this principle. However, administrative guidance is not restricted to Japan. The pattern of state responsibility for strong social, economic and political guidance can be found in the whole of Asia and covers the whole social spectrum. And people accept this role of the state. The idea that a person should be protected from

the government has never arisen; the necessary distance from the government in order to develop this idea has never been created.

This lack of detachment of the person becomes very important in connection with a second characteristic of Asian societies. Their in-group/out-group differentiation is much more pronounced than in any European society. This leads to behaviour patterns where ethnicity still plays a very important role, as the outer social limit of a society is formed by the ethnic affiliation of its members. This is the basic reason why national cohesion in Korea, Japan, or China is very strong. In the first two cases, the national populations are nearly 100% Korean or Japanese; in China the Han dominate the nation to 92%. Only with an open and cooperative leadership can other ethnicities in the same nation become part of the national family. This problem is heightened by the fact that other ethnicities are usually in minority positions. The multiethnic Asian nation thus faces two challenges: the in-group/out-group differentiation and the majority/minority issue.

When looking at social dynamics of Asian societies they show some striking differences to Euro-American civilisation. In the in-group, harmony and consensus dominate the pattern whereas out-groups are usually confronted with very harsh treatment when judged by European standards. The survival of the group is key, out-groups are only putting in effort if it contributes to the survival of the group. Ethics are thus not absolute, they are linked to personal relationships and lead to relational judgments. They are not based on absolute justice, a decisive difference from European ethical and moral values.³ Asians look at values in a very contextual way. Only in relationships that have been built up over years is trust fully present. Under these circumstances, the importance of trust patterns even exceeds the position it holds in Western behaviour. Personal networks are strongly linked to personal obligations. But contrary to Western beliefs, there is no general overriding true or false, good or bad. All depends on the circumstances in which an action takes place. The strongly concrete ways and pragmatic attitudes of Asian societies provide the base to this contextual assessment of ethics and morality that dominate all fields of human activities.

The characteristic does not, however, prevent competitive patterns in the in-group from being very developed. They show a tendency to be considerably stronger than in a European environment. But when the group comes under pressure from outside it quickly closes ranks and does not show internal differences any longer. This, too, is quite different from a European pattern where competitive dynamics in the in-group are not that strong and where internal dissent is not hidden from an outside observer.

The structural differences of society are therefore directly linked to attitudes and value patterns. Depending on social levels, out-groups can be other families of the same society, other companies in the same industry or other cities in the same country. The uppermost

limit is reached with other ethnic affiliations. In some Asian nations like Korea or Japan, the nearly exclusive ethnic composition makes for strong national unity. In Southeast Asian nations, however, the different ethnic composition asks for particular efforts to be made towards national unity. If the different ethnic composition is managed well, however, it may facilitate contact with neighbouring countries and open the nation to outside links. Research into the region unfortunately shows that ASEAN does not seem to be there yet.

2.2. Things become even more complicated when we shed light on some differences in thinking patterns. Western detachment has led to abstract and analytical ways of perceiving that neglect important influences from proximity. Again exaggerating a bit, one could say that Asians work with all the senses, whereas Westerners have reduced perception to hearing and seeing. This implies a much stronger emotional intelligence in the Asian case compared to Euro-American culture.⁴

Perception must also be seen in relation to time. If we do so, information intake from near sources very rapidly outgrows management capacity of the brain. Objects are no longer seen in the way of static photos, they are embedded in a film. Asians see reality as a film in which they are actors. Europeans see it as a sequence of photos from an observer position.⁵

The perception of a flowing reality also has a number of important consequences. It means that the only stable element in this view are personal relationships, which is the reason they are so much more important in an Asian context. The rest is flowing, including legal security. Legal security is seen in a very similar way to ethics. Legal security is always contextual and thus never as absolute as in a Western environment. These societies are highly pragmatic and act in very flexible ways. Structures or ideas are never perceived with such a static understanding as in the Western world. They serve the action, and if this is no longer the case, they are dropped without any hesitation. Ideologies cannot exist under these circumstances; they only serve a means and lack the basic, static convictions of a Western world view.

Given these social and psychic behaviour patterns the dynamics of Southeast Asian cooperation efforts become clearer. Under these different social and political circumstances Southeast Asian cooperation will not be comparable to Western organisational behaviour in international relations. Asian structures, be they economic, political, or security oriented, cannot be compared to Western organisation. The rule-based, legalistic Western ways are not Eastern ways. Asian societies are functioning in much more pragmatic ways, the institutional set-up is loose and only provides help in cooperation efforts. It does not become a normative straight jacket hindering discussions and compromises. But it is also not helping in a more consistent way for direct problem solving within the Association. It is primarily a discussion forum where the different views meet each other. This characteristic

is one of the reasons why structures follow action. They do not precede them. And whenever there was too much wishful thinking or personal narcissism, like e.g. in the formation of some institutional start-ups in Southeast Asia after the Second World War, failure was inherent from the beginning. Setting up a common currency zone without taking economic realities into account, as in the European Union, will not be a step made under these different cultural conditions. Such a decision would never find a majority among members. The lack of support is not due to a lack of will for cooperation. It is due to a more down to earth, pragmatic attitude of collective East and Southeast Asian cultures and a will to keep a harmonious way of dealing with problems.

The limits of cooperation in East and Southeast Asia become more evident to a Western observer when taking the underlying cultural aspects into consideration. At the same time, chances in a different social environment become more apparent. Unlike Europe, the pattern followed for both economic and political cooperation was an “association” instead of an “organisation”. This is no coincidence. Very likely, ASEAN and/or APEC will never become as legalistic and rule-based as organisations in a Western environment. If an agreement is signed, “rule-based” is understood in a different way by Eastern or Western partners. The joy about signing may make way to the sobering discovery that interpretative problems start with the first concrete case. One commentator of ASEAN actually went as far as saying that even the Association was just the picture presented to the outside world, internal cooperation was mostly on an informal and bilateral basis.

3. The Structure of Southeast Asian Cooperation

Under these geopolitical, social, and psychological conditions it would be a mistake to judge Southeast Asian developments by Western standards and to believe that sooner or later Southeast Asian regional structures may develop in a comparable way to Europe. This will certainly not be the case even though some Asian politicians and diplomats would hope for exactly this to happen. The latest examples are the Chinese suggestions of an Asian security cooperation that were mentioned at the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interactions and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) at the end of May 2014 in Shanghai. China sees this kind of security cooperation as Chinese engagement for the security of the region, obviously under Chinese leadership. The idea was expressed by the Chinese President in the following words: “Matters in Asia ultimately must be taken care of by Asians, Asia’s problems ultimately must be resolved by Asians and Asia’s security ultimately must be protected by Asians.” But for this idea to be accepted by neighbouring nations, China will have to learn to compromise as well and to take the concerns of its neighbours into account in a serious and credible way. Given the size of China and the

strong cohesion among Han-Chinese the opening to outside opinions will not be an easy learning process for the PR China and its representatives.

But in general, the region has gained enough self-confidence that a majority of decision-makers would no longer agree with the view of developing a closer-knit security network. Even the Chinese ideas are probably more built on this kind of Asian understanding of the functioning of an organisation. The cooperation structures in Southeast and East Asia will therefore remain loose. This is actually the best guarantee that they will continue to function in the future as well. It does not mean that consensus cannot be found for certain positions in discussions within the United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organisation (WTO) or the International Monetary Fund (IMF). But it will not be a consistent attitude of ASEAN or any other organisational structure, it will be a pragmatic common position under given circumstances. It is not excluded that outside pressure may also have an influence, such as the dominating position of China pushing ASEAN towards taking common positions more often. But without pressure from outside – and without a stronger will to overcome these challenges internally - the usual pragmatic and harmonious patterns of non-interference in national matters will continue to dominate regional organisational structures in Asia and will create the view in the West that these structures are largely inefficient. But in East and Southeast Asia, efficiency never starts with results. Efficiency becomes possible only with a functioning human network. Management by objectives has never been a determining force in Asian efficiency. It can only be attained through orientation towards the person and corresponding social networks. Then problems can be discussed and solutions found.

3.1. The Association of South-East Asian Nations ASEAN was created in 1967 after a few unsuccessful efforts in different frameworks (see the Bangkok Charter) and it is interesting to ask why this association finally worked whereas other efforts had failed before. The structuring of ASEAN as an association rather than an organisation is in itself a factor of success. The second element is the fact that no outside power has become a member of the organisation, they were only associated with it when the threats diminished after the end of the Cold War. And the third – and probably decisive – factor of success is the principle of non-interference in national matters of other members that led ASEAN to become the key cooperation structure in Southeast Asia.

Different – especially Western - observers have stated after the Asian financial crisis that ASEAN has no clout and that the organisation is not really helpful in regional cooperation, or at least that the cooperation efforts were not going far enough in a globalised world. With an eye on unsuccessful cooperation efforts in the fifties and early sixties, one is tempted to say that ASEAN did function exactly because of these characteristics. The geopolitical situation would not have allowed an organisation with more influence.

Under these conditions, and particularly in a collective social environment, one should not underestimate the importance of personal encounters between political leaders of different member states. These informal contacts have probably been the best means of managing international challenges.

It is true, of course, that the record of the first ten years of existence was not brilliant. This is not surprising, as geopolitical and economic conditions were not very favourable at the beginning of the organisation. Economic factors really started to change only with the integration of ASEAN into a wider East Asian market created essentially by the Japanese economic development and the consequences of the strong Yen appreciation following the Plaza Agreement in 1985 and later by the opening of trade with the People's Republic of China.

With Asian economic development and the opening of China, stronger cooperation and functioning of ASEAN followed quite rapidly. At the Fourth ASEAN Summit in 1992, ASEAN decided to realise **the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA)** by 2008, but giving the later members Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam the possibility for realisation five years later. The implementation schedule was accelerated, however, so that AFTA became fully operational in 2003 after ten instead of fifteen years.

AFTA was initiated with the clear aim to increase the competitiveness of ASEAN members in a global market and to attract foreign direct investment. The scheme is remarkable for two reasons. First, it is a sign that developing diversification of ASEAN countries has led to an increase in internal trade. The full functioning of AFTA should allow further intraregional trade development. Secondly, AFTA is interesting from a theoretical point of view. Unlike the EU or NAFTA, it does not apply a common external tariff on imported goods, documenting thus a clear openness to outside nations.

This positive development may, however, have led to some exaggerated views on what ASEAN could achieve and what it actually should do. The lack of cooperation during the Asian financial crisis seemed to indicate to many observers that ASEAN was actually not very useful, having been unable to define a common position in the crisis.

Even if it is true that ASEAN may not be a particularly useful body to manage a crisis at hand, the integration of Southeast Asia in a bigger Asian economic environment has allowed the Association to push the integration of member economies to a considerable extent. At the same time, common political standpoints are developed where this is necessary in the eyes of its members. This became possible in the new millennium because structural changes in local economies opened up possibilities for cooperation that had not existed before. On the political side, the progressing integration into a more Asian or even Pacific set-up has not

only provided new challenges to ASEAN members but also created the need for common positions in certain situations.

As a consequence of the internal consolidation process and the rapid rise of Chinese influence, the concept of the **ASEAN Community** was launched in 2003, with the triple aim of developing an **ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)**, an **ASEAN security community** (being enlarged later to the ASEAN political-security community), and an **ASEAN socio-cultural community**. The first should be fully functional by 2015, the last two by 2020. But the institutionalisation of the Association did not stop there. The ASEAN Charter of November 2007 paved the way for a stronger and more coherent legal document for the Association. The traditional “Asian way”, alluded to also by the Asian Development Bank (ADB)⁶ book on Asian integration slowly gives way to more rule-based and formally institutionalised forms of cooperation. But even these developments should not lure into misunderstandings. “Rule-based” does not mean the same in Western and Eastern contexts. In a European context, “rule-based” would clearly mean according to the legal texts, whereas in a Southeast Asian environment, the contextual influences on a problem situation remain the decisive elements of judgment. The rule is only providing a framework; interpretation is freer and does not bind the judge to the same extent.

The Charter touches in quite a considerable way on rules to settle disputes. It is these stipulations that show again the very Asian way of dealing with controversial issues. Relying on the basic principles of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation of 1976, it strengthens the role of conciliatory services that the Secretary-General of ASEAN can offer to the parties of the conflict. In case the Secretary-General is not able to facilitate a solution, then the matter can be referred to the ASEAN Summit. Here again, given the maintenance of the key principle of ASEAN non-interference in national affairs and dispute settlement based on informal understandings, it is not to be expected that solutions are drawn without the agreement of the parties to the conflict. So although the Charter introduces a rule-based system with legal obligations, the functioning of it may still differ considerably from a Western understanding.

The Asia Economic Community (AEC) Forum is the latest addition to Asian cooperation efforts. The forum was created in 2009 mainly by South Korean efforts as a yearly event. In some economic circles, there is the impression that economic cooperation should go further and lead to economic integration in a Western style. Whether this is a viable idea, going further than a pure discussion forum, will have to be seen in the future. But given the ethnic background patterns in East and Southeast Asia, as well as the differing interest structures, it is hard to believe that the AEC will go further than the structures that have been established so far. Economic competition is nearly as important as security concerns, so the barriers for cooperation are considerable in the economic field as well.

Development of **ASEAN external relations** was decided formally by ASEAN only in 1976, after informal discussions with quite a number of countries had taken place. Once decided, external relations with regional partners developed rapidly. In 1976, ASEAN established formal dialogue relations with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the UNDP, followed in 1977 by the US. The dialogue relation with the EU was signed in 1980, and with Canada in 1981. After a certain pause, Korea followed in 1991. The end of the Cold War and the development of a multipolar world made the joining of China and Russia possible in 1996. Sectoral dialogue relations were established with India in 1995 and with Pakistan in 1997.

As a consequence of these dialogue partnerships, preferential formulas were developed at the end of the 20th century. **ASEAN + 3**, a special formula of meetings between ASEAN and its most important neighbours China, Japan and the Republic of Korea, was inaugurated in 1997 and includes meetings on different governmental levels. **ASEAN+6** adds Australia, New Zealand and the US to the picture, enlarging the dialogue relations over the Pacific. Added to these efforts were **East Asian Summits (EAS)**, convened for the first time in 2005 by Malaysia, but it is not quite clear yet how these summits will interact with broader regional organisations such as APEC.

The **ASEAN-Europe Meeting (ASEM)** is an offshoot of ASEAN-EU relations and was created in 1996. ASEAN members do not seem to be too happy about the ASEM process. The general opinion is rather that the EU side is lecturing Southeast Asian partners, especially on human rights issues. The lack of a strategic position of the EU in Southeast Asia leads EU members to concentrate often on political and economic issues from national perspectives. Furthermore, there may be a basic misunderstanding in the functioning of ASEAN by European partner nations – or just a missionary zeal funnelled by political pressures at home. The enlargement of ASEAN to ten members, including former communist countries and especially of Myanmar, gives outside nations the impression of a coherent organisation rather than of a loose association. The abstinence of ASEAN from discussing internal issues more openly is not understood by the Europeans. As it is an important element for ASEAN to function, its members have the impression that Europeans do not really understand them, thus creating a rift rather than building a bridge between the two regions. Some meetings were thus cancelled and the process is far from satisfactory in the eyes of both sides.

Nowhere is national and even ethnic influence more evident than in the security field. In security cooperation in particular, one may argue that the loose association style of ASEAN members meets its limits. This background is further strengthened by territorial disputes dating from before the founding of the association. At first sight, it is therefore surprising that anything with the name of security is part of regional efforts. But it was larger security issues that led ASEAN and regional actors to set up the **ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)**.

ARF was created to deal with security issues in the Southeast Asian region by the 26th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in 1994. The objectives of the ASEAN Regional Forum are outlined in the First ARF Chairman's Statement, namely: 1) to foster constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and concern; and 2) to make significant contributions towards confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region.

The founding of the ARF thus meant a change of policy in the region - but hardly within ASEAN. The fall of the USSR and the opening of the Iron Curtain allowed for wide participation. Apart from ASEAN members, the USA, China, Japan, India, the Russian Federation and the EU are participants in the forum. But given the fact that it counts 27 participants it is, again, not to be expected that bilateral territorial issues within ASEAN will be a key focus or will even find their solutions in discussions of the ARF. Furthermore, members brought in different reasons for participating in the forum. Whereas the US, for example, had the clear intention of making China become "a responsible world power,"⁷ China herself wanted to prove that she was just that – with other members not sure whether this conciliatory approach was just clever strategy or real in itself.⁸ She was actually able to join only because there was no danger of ARF starting to act on internal affairs.⁹ On the other hand, territorial issues on the bilateral level all remain there, often not talked about, but creating continuous small skirmishes between parties concerned, either on land or on the open sea.

Nevertheless, the forum has, in cooperative terms again, its clear function in a region that may become more volatile security-wise than Europe itself, as quite a number of security experts are ready to warn.¹⁰ It will not be able, however, to solve any real crisis developing out of problematic circumstances, as ASEAN itself was not able to participate in any functional way even to help, let alone solve the issues of the Asian financial crisis in the second half of the nineties. The very loose set-up helps members to keep in contact and may be a track to bilaterally solve problems through leaders knowing each other, but a direct help to solve crisis situations in the future does not seem to be possible through this kind of loose organisational structure.

3.2. The Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) was not a child of the end of the Cold War; it was founded in 1989 as an informal meeting, pushed mainly by Japan and Australia. But it quickly came under the influence of factual détente as China and the Russian Federation became members in the nineties. In 1993, a mission statement was developed: "APEC is the premier Asia-Pacific economic forum. Our primary goal is to support sustainable economic growth and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region. We are united in our drive to build a dynamic and harmonious Asia-Pacific community by championing free and open trade and investment, promoting and accelerating regional

economic integration, encouraging economic and technical cooperation, enhancing human security, and facilitating a favourable and sustainable business environment. Our initiatives turn policy goals into concrete results and agreements into tangible benefits.” Membership in the organisation includes some of the key economies of the world. APEC members are accountable for more than half of the world’s GNP and 44% of its trade. The Asian financial crisis and the world financial crisis ten years later seem to have led to a part of its regional dynamism being lost. The fact that the Doha negotiations of the WTO do not advance limits APEC multilateral developments as well. But given East and South East Asia’s position in a global world, it still remains a key organisation in the economic cooperation field, allowing yearly encounters among the 21 members on head of state and ministerial levels.

4. Influences from the Main Powers in the Region

As described, one of the main aims of regional cooperation in the Cold War period was actually to keep the potentially negative effects of power struggles between superpowers out of the region. But the influence of global factors has marked Southeast Asia as well. Even ASEAN found it useful to associate outside actors into its institutional structure, the background to the ASEAN + 3 system and to bilateral ASEAN + 1 relations. The fall of the Soviet Union led to an end of the Cold War threat, but at the same time, emerging China has created a situation that is perceived by some ASEAN members as a new danger. China was in a conciliatory mood until a few years ago, but when it came to territorial questions in the South China Sea, the Chinese position has generally been quite firm, though common exploitation has been offered as a way out of the problem. Nobody knows, however, whether Chinese attitudes will change once the naval arm is strong enough to defend Chinese interests.¹¹ Recent moves by China have actually shaken the security situation in a substantial way. The necessity to announce fishing vessels that are to fish in the territories that China regards as exclusively their own are a marked expression of hardening positions. Recent developments between Chinese and Philippine vessels or clashes with Vietnamese vessels when Chinese state companies built oil platforms in the region claimed by both nations show quite an intransigent attitude of the Chinese defence of interests and do not send promising signals for future discussions with Beijing. A growing Chinese intransigence can also be seen in the decision to declare a new Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the Senkaku Islands. Whether these developments are part of internal power politics in China or whether they are simply a hardening of foreign policy stands cannot be said with certainty at the moment. In regard to ASEAN efforts, one can say that whether or not the presence of big powers was welcome, they have always been part of the regional geopolitical set-up in direct or indirect ways.

This is particularly the case since China started to open up. The inevitability of China becoming a regional power is a topic in any discussion with Southeast Asian leaders. This development and the new Chinese attitudes in the East and South China Seas seem to have led to a change of tactics of Southeast Asian nations. When the earlier policy of ASEAN was to keep world powers out of the region, the fact that its neighbour, China, has become a world actor changed the situation in a decided way. With the founding of the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN still tries to keep control of the agenda of ARF, but established a forum of discussion including world powers. The inevitability of Chinese ascent probably led to the insight that a balancing of this new regional power was only possible by including the USA into the regional picture again. The US had always remained an actor in the region. The signs that the US have given to their partners in the region have, however, often been quite ambiguous in the past three decades. Things may have changed to some extent the Asian “pivot” of US foreign policy has become a catchphrase by now. The USA cannot neglect the surge in economic power of the PRC that has started to be translated into a considerable upgrade of the Chinese military strength. The dynamics of a power shift so aptly described by Mearsheimer must be of concern to the US and to the rest of the world, although its outcome are not very clear yet. But all the signs have pointed for some time already to the creation of a blue water naval arm that goes along with the maritime aspirations of the nation. The heavy hand used to express own interests underline Mearsheimer’s fears of a coming conflict, although it is not in the mind of either of the two powers.¹² So when the challenges from the Chinese presence became more evident, the inclusion of both powers in a regional grouping started to make sense for Southeast Asian leaders. On the other hand, the fact that the strategic intensions of the two powers are not yet very clear provides another important obstacle to establish a more cohesive security structure in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Role of Japan

Japan had an essential role in the dynamics of cooperation in Southeast Asia for different reasons. But Japanese activities were still regarded with some doubts by her Asian neighbours; the occupation in World War II was not forgotten nor forgiven that easily. Furthermore, market-opening measures that might have helped to improve the Japanese image in the region were very slow to come. Japan has never really used her market potential to allow neighbouring countries to become less dependent on the US markets by diversifying exports to Japan. Japan has remained quite protectionist in the agricultural field, the sector in which ASEAN nations have a good export potential. The nation has thus deprived itself of a formidable chance to develop a more pronounced leadership role in East Asia.

Nevertheless, the biggest input at the start of economic integration in East and Southeast Asia came from Japan – and started at a very precise date: the signing of the Plaza Agreement in 1985. The agreement led to an appreciation of the yen by more than 100% in the two years following the signing and meant that Japanese industries had to go abroad with their production. The first essential waves of Japanese FDI went to South Korea and Taiwan, forcing these two actors to appreciate their own currencies and pushing their industrial production out to Southeast Asia. After quite a number of breaches of contract by Chinese partners in the first half of the eighties, Japanese companies shunned away from investments to the PRC until well into the nineties.

The linkage of the economies of the region was the consequence of these currency appreciations. Given their comparable economic structures, these forces were essential for Southeast Asian cooperation and ASEAN development. Only with the integration of the Association into a larger East Asian economic area were they able to move ahead. The influx of FDI from East Asian partners, involving a considerable transfer of modern production technologies was basically the start for Southeast Asian economies to diversify and to profit from the new markets available. With these developments, intraregional trade took off in a meaningful way within ASEAN as well. Without these developments of the last decades, it would have been unthinkable to sign a charter like the one for an East Asian Community in 2007, envisaging an open free trade area among ASEAN members by the year 2015.

The Influence of China

The role of China in East Asian cooperation patterns becomes more and more important, but remains ambiguous. This is partly due to the rapid development of China and her growing global role. Nobody is really sure how China will interpret her new international role in the future, both in the economic and political fields. China's economic influence has so far been quite beneficial to Southeast Asia. The strongly supportive role of China towards the Southeast Asian nations during the Asian financial crisis is seen very positively and is set against the lack of support for Thailand from the IMF and the USA at the beginning of the crisis. China's surge has also led to a strong development of intra-regional trade. On the other hand, the conciliatory attitude of China in geostrategic issues so far has been seen by many decision makers as purely accommodating, due to the lack of military means to defend her demands. In fact, China has remained very tight-lipped concerning the mainland – Taiwan relations or the maritime boundaries in the East and South China Seas. Many decision makers thus wonder how China would behave if she had the means to defend her territorial demands. These geopolitical conditions lead to very ambiguous Southeast Asian

positions towards the big neighbour in the north. The difficulty in assessing China's position also stems from internal differences among ASEAN members themselves. It remains open whether the growing weight of China will work as a strengthening factor for ASEAN by forcing members to stand closer together and unite in a more decided way to defend their individual issues as common interests or whether the different bilateral relations of ASEAN members with China will form a centrifugal force and will heighten internal problems, thus endangering ASEAN cohesion. The lack of cohesion and of common action during the Asian financial crisis leads more to the conclusion that the new Chinese weight might be a stress factor for the association rather than a pressure element leading to closer cooperation among its members.

Quite an important – and equally unclear – factor is the attitude of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asian nations. How far are they – and will they remain – national actors? China herself has no longer addressed them directly as she did sometimes in the past. But blood relations count very strongly in all East Asian nations. If internal difficulties in Southeast Asian countries should reopen ethnic wounds, then the loyalty of ethnic Chinese in these countries is under pressure again and could lead to a closer link of the diaspora with the mainland. The strong economic links today are mainly supported by the local Chinese business community.¹³ If this positive support for China in Southeast Asia should weaken for one reason or another, then a more critical attitude towards China is bound to be the result even in countries that are friendlier to China than others.

In general, Chinese attitudes try to be conciliatory – but on quite a number of issues, this is just a form of behaviour. The real attitude may be rather intransigent, as discussions about Chinese construction projects in the upper Mae Kong River have also shown. Chinese attitudes may be conciliatory, but without making any decisive steps to give up its own intentions and interests. In the more recent months, China has become very vocal and sometimes active in the defence of its territorial demands. It remains to be seen how far her navy and air force are really ready to back recent official statements about the fly control zone in the East China Sea and the demands of registration for fishery vessels in the South China Sea.

A completely different picture may emerge, however, if the US is taking a more decided stance in regional questions. In ASEAN eyes, the growing weight of China may be neutralised to a good extent by a stronger American commitment to the region. The remarks of former Foreign Secretary Hillary Clinton about the Spratly Island issue when she was still in office are remarkable because no common ASEAN position has so far been developed in this disputed area in the South China Sea, mainly due to internal ASEAN differences about territorial issues in these waters. The question is whether the US stand is reliable or just another statement in a continuation of changing US attitudes as has marked the last thirty

years of US presence on the Western rim of the Pacific.¹⁴ As mentioned above, the founding of the ARF is an interesting step in this respect. It does seem to be an effort to balance growing Chinese influence by inviting the USA in as well. It is not surprising therefore that China prefers a Southeast Asian environment where the US is not a member.

The Positioning of the USA

It is remarkable how the views about the USA in Asia have changed. The end of the Vietnam War seems to have marked the start of a new assessment of a region in which power has always been the ultimate factor of influence. The fall of the Soviet Union eradicated another threat felt in Southeast Asia.

The actual difficulties of the USA after the financial crisis, the lack of American support for Thailand when the financial crisis in Asia hit, as well as the problems of the US in getting out of Iraq and Afghanistan finally led to new appreciations of the superpower's Asian intentions. Even a questioning of the US strategic position by its closer allies like Australia is no longer out of the question. In an article in the US journal *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Australian Brigadier General John Frewen wonders whether Australia will be able in the future to stand closely by the US without losing out in her regional network with China. Most regional actors still see the US as a world power – but the perception of the US as a hegemon has gone. The US position in Asia has often been unstable due to internal US policy debates. In recent years, the US engagement in Asia has been overshadowed by concerns in Iraq and Afghanistan and retreat from these countries has not prepared the internal American scene for another engagement in the Far East. More recent developments in the Ukraine are another sign that the US may not be able to concentrate as much on its Asian allies as they would hope. Furthermore, the difficulties with which the US is confronted are too obvious in the eyes of Asian observers – and China is too near not to feel the strong growth of a different actor. Chinese presence has to be taken into account, first of all because of the steadily growing mutual trade patterns. There may be an over-evaluation of Chinese influence and power at this very moment – but like in other instances, perception seems to be more important than reality. And general trends do not really indicate any changes to the growing influence of the Northern neighbour.

The US presence in East and Southeast Asia is still felt to create stability in the Asian security environment. On the other hand, the US fight against Muslim extremists has increased political threats in Southeast Asia. Given the weakening of the US as a consumer market for Asian goods at the same time, only a stronger US involvement in the geostrategic field will allow the superpower to keep influence in East and Southeast Asia. Changing the prevailing

US image in Asia from a self-absorbed unilateralist to a thoughtful consensus builder would increase US ability in ways likely to have constructive results for US interests in the region, as an international researcher has put it.¹⁵

5. ASEAN Vision 2020 and ASEAN Community Concept

At the ASEAN Summit 1997 in Kuala Lumpur on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the association, the Heads of State or Government reaffirmed their commitment to the aims of the Bangkok Declaration and developed the Vision 2020. It was further strengthened by the ASEAN Community concept decided upon by the members during the 40th anniversary of the association. The visions for the future of ASEAN vary from a cultural to an economic and security community. But given the actual limits to cooperation among Southeast Asian nations, it seems to be far-fetched to speak about a community as long as discussions about internal affairs of other members are not accepted. In this respect – even including clear progress in economic cooperation matters – the views on an ASEAN, let alone on an Asian community, seem to be far-fetched and are to be seen as visions rather than concrete aims to be attained – even if a longer term future is taken into account.

Summary

When looking into the development of regional cooperation in Southeast Asia, one realises that institutional structures usually follow activities. They are not created in order to make things happen – things happen and prove right, and then a structure is created to support the activities. Some structures created after the Pacific War were obviously built too early, they did not function properly in the eyes of their members. Whenever there was wishful thinking behind the creation of a structure, it did not work in this difficult geopolitical environment.

The institutional set-up shows also that structures are basically there to facilitate personal contacts, not to provide legal security by accepting a charter. This leads to considerably higher flexibility in dealing with problems than under more legally binding instances. At the same time, it creates a weakness in times of crisis, as it is difficult to find consensus under stress of time and situation. For foreign policy actors, this means that they can make good ground through personal contacts with key individuals in particular institutions. A considerable advantage lies in the fact that wherever possible, the programs of the institutions are pragmatically focused, concentrating on things to do rather than on wishful thinking.

But these basics also demonstrate the limits of cooperation structures in Southeast Asia. International relations in East and Southeast Asia remain fluid. The basic (legal) security characterising Western organisational structures is lacking. Due to different cultural traits, it will probably never be introduced. The underlying problem in ASEAN is obviously created by the still extant territorial questions between its members and its neighbours. Although many Asians point to the fact that there has been no war since 1967, territorial issues linger and tend to come up from time to time. In this kind of situation, it may be of interest to develop some closer cooperation mechanisms in security matters. But these mechanisms too should just present a kind of form into which a concrete case could then be moulded.

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Appendix One

Cooperation Efforts in the Southeast Asian Region after WW II

SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization)

- Established by eight countries, from the Asian side the Philippines, Thailand, Pakistan. Dominance by the US and their partners Britain, France, Australia and New Zealand
- 1977 Dissolution of the Organization

ASA (Association of Southeast Asia)

1961 Founded by Malaya, Thailand and the Philippines

ASEAN

- 1967 Founding of ASEAN in Bangkok by five nations: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore (who had been dismissed of the Malaysian Federation in 1965).
- 1984 Brunei Darussalam becomes sixth member after attaining independence
- 1995 Vietnam joins after losing its foothold in Eastern Europe with the fall of the Socialist governments there
- 1997 Adherence of Laos and Myanmar, Cambodia had internal problems which led to its later adherence
- 1999 Adherence of Cambodia

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Footnotes

1. See the sober assessment of the situation in Carothers (2010).
2. The differentiation into these three levels – dialogue, cooperation, integration - was mentioned in the article by Dieter, H. ; APEC, Australia and New Zealand: Pathway to Asia? In: Rüländ, J.; Manske, E.; Draguhn, W. (Eds.)(2002). *Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)*, S. 135-152). The first decade. London: Routledge Curzon
3. The ethics debate has started with Kohlberg's studies that led to a strong reaction from female researchers. Asian societies are comparable in their ethics to female ethics – or rather female ethics are based on proximity and less on distance, the same characteristic that marks Asian societies. See Kohlberg (1984) and Gilligan (1993).
4. See the lack of emotional intelligence criticised by Goleman (1996).
5. Space does not allow me to go further into the discussion of these issues. I should therefore like to direct the reader towards my comparative theory of culture published under the title of "Kultur, Raum und Zeit" (2012).
6. ADB (2010), p. 121.
7. Defense Secretary William Perry in 1995, see A.I. Johnson, p. 110.
8. A.I. Johnson, p. 141.
9. See Christensen, p. 39ff.
10. See Christensen again, p. 25.
11. See in this respect the excellent article by Australian Brigadier General John Frewen (bibl.) in the *Joint Forces Quarterly*, end of 2010.
12. See Mearsheimer (2013)
13. Concerning the relationship between the local ruling elite and the Chinese business circles see the interesting overview by Studwell (2007) on Asian godfathers.
14. Quite an adequate description of US policies towards the Western Pacific ist he pun „Uncle Sam, sometimes you see him, sometimes you don't“ as a caricature described the situation once.
15. See the contribution of Sutter, R. „The United States in Asia: Challenged but Durable Leadership.“ In: Shambaugh, D.; Yahuda, M. (Eds.)(2008). *International Relations of Asia*, pp. 85-103. Plymouth, Rowman & Littlefield.

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