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New directions in
the relationship
between **ASEAN**
and the **UN**

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The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD Centre) is an independent Swiss Foundation dedicated to helping improve the global response to armed conflict. It attempts to achieve this by mediating between warring parties and providing support to the broader mediation community

114, rue de lausanne
ch-1202
geneva
switzerland
info@hdcentre.org
t: + 41 22 908 11 30
f: +41 22 908 11 40
www.hdcentre.org

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Introduction and summary

Thailand's chairmanship of ASEAN over 2008–9 provides a welcome opportunity to strengthen co-operation between ASEAN and the United Nations. For years ASEAN and the United Nations have talked about an enhanced partnership. But despite some progress, co-operation between the two bodies lags far behind co-operation between the UN and other major regional organizations, such as the African Union and the European Union. There remain sensitivities about the UN becoming too involved in regional matters, particularly in the areas of peace and security and human rights. The challenge is to be mindful of these sensitivities on the one hand, whilst finding new ways of working together that will deliver concrete and meaningful results.

Following ratification by all member states, ASEAN's new charter came into force on 15 December at a foreign minister's meeting hosted by the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta. Efforts are also underway to create single ASEAN Economic, Social-Cultural, and Political-Security communities by 2015¹. In 2009, ASEAN will create the first inter-governmental human rights body in Asia². Under the terms of the new ASEAN Charter the Jakarta-based ASEAN Secretariat will be restructured and strengthened. All this suggests a watershed for the organization, where a stronger relationship with the UN might be a critical component for future progress.

During 2008, co-operation between the UN and ASEAN took a dramatic step forward, with the still unsung success of the joint emergency humanitarian operation organized in Myanmar in the wake of Cyclone Nargis. From having no history of operational ties, the two bodies managed, within a period of days, to coordinate a joint diplomatic, financial and emergency relief response to one of the biggest humanitarian disasters in decades within an incredibly complex political environment. Appreciating the magnitude of this success and building on it should be central to any future UN-ASEAN agenda.

The previous year, in 2007, ASEAN was granted observer status by the UN General Assembly and Thailand will host the Third ASEAN-UN Summit at the rescheduled ASEAN leaders' summit in February 2009. This further institutionalization of ties comes after more than three decades of co-operation, mostly in the development field between ASEAN and many UN agencies, funds and programmes as well as the UN's Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). Additionally, the UN may soon become a dialogue partner of ASEAN, an idea initially discussed among ASEAN foreign ministers in 2007 and proposed in September 2008 by ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan at a meeting between ASEAN foreign ministers and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon. There is, therefore, more than a sufficient institutional framework for progress. The key

1 Whilst the outlines of the ASEAN economic community are fairly clear, with elements such as the liberalization of intra-regional trade, the goals of the socio-cultural community and the political-security community are vague. There is a detailed blueprint for the creation of the economic community. The blueprints for the other two communities have not yet been agreed.

2 Here again the existing language remains vague and the terms of reference for the new body have not yet been agreed.

is finding concrete measures that will place flesh on the bones of this thirty-year relationship.

Future co-operation between ASEAN and the UN will likely gravitate towards the economic and social fields and on issues related to the Millennium Development Goals. ASEAN Governments are more comfortable working with international organizations on these issues than on political and security issues; moreover, the UN system's capacity in the region remains heavily weighted in this direction. The Bangkok-based ESCAP is well-suited to identifying ways forward on this front.

However, there is a pressing need to find new ways of moving forward in other areas as well. ASEAN countries face numerous transnational challenges that require both regional and global solutions. The capacity of existing bilateral and multilateral arrangements in the ASEAN region to deal with environmental policy, labour migration, food security, disaster relief as well as narcotics and public health, though developing remains weak. ASEAN is at the core of the ASEAN Regional Framework, the principal security forum in the entire Asia-Pacific region and ASEAN as an organization aspires to take the lead in identifying and responding to potential crises. Both the UN and ASEAN's capacities are limited in many fields – from preventing the spread of infectious diseases to mediating armed conflicts. It is important to bear in mind the caution of many ASEAN Governments and their sensitivities on issues related to peace and security and human rights. But there is a practical need both to pool the limited capacities of the two organizations where possible as well as to identify complementary arrangements, based on a clearer sense of comparative advantages.

In addition, UN-ASEAN co-operation should not be seen as a one-way street. A strengthened partnership should also include ways in which ASEAN can better contribute to addressing global challenges, employing regional skills and knowledge in joint efforts with the UN outside the Southeast Asian region.

This paper suggests some possible new avenues for co-operation:

Firstly, there is an urgent need to lock-in and build on the UN and ASEAN's joint success in Myanmar in the wake of Cyclone Nargis.

Ongoing efforts, led by ASEAN, the UN and the Government of Myanmar, but also involving the international financial institutions, the International Red Cross Movement and dozens of international and national non-governmental organizations, should be seen as a model for work elsewhere, not only in the region. However, this remains a fragile success and depends on continued high-level diplomatic investment to keep many parties happy within this complex political environment and ensure continued humanitarian access. The post-Nargis experience should also be used to initiate closer ties between ASEAN and the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). ASEAN and OCHA should undertake a proper lessons-learned exercise on its collaboration in Myanmar and use the experience to inform

and expedite ASEAN's aim to establish an ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance Centre. Co-operation between ASEAN, the UN, and the Myanmar Government in the area of disaster risk reduction may also be fruitful and could serve as another area for enhanced co-operation elsewhere.

Secondly, with ASEAN's new observer status in New York and the UN's incipient status as an ASEAN dialogue partner, ASEAN should play a more active role in collectively informing and shaping UN discussions on emerging global challenges as well as discussions on strengthening the UN system.

Whilst ASEAN members may for now be reluctant to work with the UN on regional peace and security issues, there should be less hesitation to enter into broader discussions about emerging global challenges. Encouraging ASEAN to play a stronger leadership role on security agendas may be a useful first step; drawing on ASEAN's own experience and ideas should also aid the UN's own thinking and policy development. For example, nearly all ASEAN countries have experiences in moving from war to peace and in development lasting state structures. Yet these experiences have rarely if ever figured in UN discussions on 'post-conflict peace-building', discussions often based on experiences in Africa, the Balkans and elsewhere.

Thirdly, ASEAN should enter into a more active partnership with the UN's Department of Political Affairs, to share lessons-learned and to establish a joint programme of research, training and other capacity-building activities.

This could be facilitated by the finalization of the ASEAN Political and Security Community blueprint (and mindful still of sensitivities in this area) and with the setting up of the UN Department of Political Affairs Mediation Support Unit. The annual conflict prevention seminars should be geared towards a year-long work plan, designed to help inform implementation of the Political and Security Community blueprint.

Fourthly, both secretariats should strengthen and rationalize their liaison functions with one another, in New York, Bangkok and Jakarta.

The 2007 Memorandum of Understanding between the ASEAN and UN secretariats provides the framework for a more concrete partnership. The Department of Political Affairs should be represented in Bangkok, to complement the existing regional presences in the Development, Economic and Social, Humanitarian, and Human Rights fields, and a UN liaison officer should be posted in Jakarta.

2 | Background

a) ASEAN – A new charter and an evolving role

More than forty years after the Bangkok Declaration and its creation, ASEAN has developed into one of the world's largest regional organizations, with a combined population of 570 million people (second only to the African Union) and a trillion US dollar economy. In 2003, ASEAN leaders pledged to create a common ASEAN community by 2015 with three pillars: An ASEAN Economic Community which seeks to liberalize trade and investment throughout the region; an ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community; and an ASEAN Political and Security Community. In 2007, ASEAN approved its landmark charter, which amongst other things will lead to the establishment of the first inter-governmental human rights body in Asia and the strengthening of the ASEAN Secretariat. In addition to these institutional developments, the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar prompted ASEAN to take the lead in establishing a sizable international humanitarian effort and the first ASEAN Secretariat-led operation ever (see below). The next few years will be a watershed in ASEAN's institutional development and greater co-operation with the UN system will be important for its success.

This watershed also comes at a time of continuing scepticism regarding ASEAN's relevance on a range of issues, from regional peace and security to the protection and promotion of human rights, to future development and prosperity. ASEAN now enjoys 'dialogue partnerships' with ten countries including all the major global powers and there is a steady-stream of declarations and agreements leaving practically no area of governance and international relations untouched. But there remains little in the way of concrete outcomes from the constant round of high-level meetings and it would be in ASEAN's interest to evolve ways in which it could become more relevant and effective. Idealistic hopes for the new ASEAN Charter eventually gave way to more sober assessments on the willingness of Governments to cede any significant degree of sovereignty to the regional body. ASEAN as a symbol of regional amity and adherence to a set of norms, including the non-interference in the internal affairs of others, appears strong. Whether ASEAN can make a difference in ordinary people's lives through specific programmes and projects remains questionable.

b) The United Nations and regional organisations – Efforts to strengthen partnerships

During the past few years, the UN has expanded its partnership with regional organizations, in particular with NATO and the African Union in the area of

peacekeeping. The UN Charter provides a clear role for regional organizations in the maintenance of international peace and security. Chapter V encourages parties to a conflict to first seek a solution through (inter alia) regional bodies and Chapter VIII states that Member States that entered into a regional arrangement “make every effort to achieve pacific settlement of local disputes through such regional arrangements or by such regional agencies before referring them to the Security Council.”

The 2005 World Summit called for strengthened relationships between the UN and regional organizations, including through “formalized agreements between the respective secretariats” and the “involvement of regional organizations in the work of the Security Council”. The Summit also called on regional organizations to “ensure” that they have “the capacity for the prevention of armed conflict or peacekeeping” and “consider the option of placing such capacity in the framework of the United Nations Standby Arrangements System”. Today there is no tidy separation of economic and political security issues, something ASEAN member states are aware of through burgeoning discussions with larger powers in other regional forums such as the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation initiative and the East Asian Community.

Considerable work has gone into to systematizing co-operation with many different regional organizations; with the African Union for example there is both a UN Liaison Office in Addis Ababa reporting to the UN Secretary-General through the Department of Political Affairs, as well as a liaison office between OCHA and the AU.

c) The UN and ASEAN – Old and new relationships

3 GA Resolution A/57/35 of 2002, A/59/05 of 2004 and A/61/46 of 2006

General Assembly resolutions in 2002, 2004 and 2006³ have specifically called for a strengthening of co-operation between the UN and ASEAN. ASEAN’s relations with the UN system go back to 1972 and the first agreements on co-operation between ASEAN and UN agencies, funds and programmes. Since 1977, UNDP has been an ASEAN dialogue partner, the only non-State body to have that status until this year. In February 2000, the first ASEAN-UN Summit was held in Bangkok, during which peace and security, human resources development and the future role of the UN in the region were discussed. The Summit subsumed earlier arrangements with UNDP and sought to broaden the scale and scope of ASEAN-UN co-operation.

In 2002, ASEAN entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with ESCAP, agreeing to “yearly consultations at senior official level to identify and conduct possible joint activities” in a wide range of areas. The Second ASEAN-UN Summit was held in New York in September 2005. At that time ASEAN leaders and the UN Secretary-General reaffirmed the need to further widen ASEAN-UN co-operation, highlighting a range of thematic issues such as poverty alleviation, prevention and control of infectious diseases, disaster management, transnational issues, development, and peace and security. The following year, the General Assembly granted ASEAN observer status.

In September 2007, an MOU was signed by the Secretaries-General of the UN and ASEAN, with agreements to “exchange of information and expertise” and to cooperate “towards both the maintenance of international and regional peace and security as well as towards development”. The MOU calls on the two secretariat heads “to make appropriate administrative arrangements to ensure effective co-operation and liaison between the two Secretariats” and “asks the two organizations to hold regular consultations on issues of strategic importance”. None of this has been implemented, though the post-Nargis co-operation was organized under the framework of this MOU.

The Third ASEAN-UN Summit was scheduled to take place in Chiang Mai in December 2008, but was postponed because of domestic political instability in Thailand until April 2009.

d) Social, economic and development co-operation – Old relationships continuing

ASEAN’s policies in this area are focused on the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, the narrowing of regional development gaps, and the creation of an ASEAN Economic Community or single market based on an ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). Economic integration and the simultaneous narrowing of regional development disparities are seen as paramount ASEAN objectives.

UN co-operation with ASEAN has historically been focused on economic and development areas. UNDP has worked with all ASEAN Member States, as well as with ASEAN itself, and has played an important role in shaping regional development strategies and providing financial and other assistance to ASEAN projects. ESCAP, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) also have long-standing relationships.

Today, almost all UN agencies, funds and programmes have active programmes in the ASEAN region and regular interaction with ASEAN across a range of issues. In its efforts to establish regional mechanisms for financial stability, ASEAN has more recently been cooperating with the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and ADB. The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) all have cooperative arrangements with ASEAN.

During the past year, ASEAN leaders and the UN Secretary-General have highlighted issues related to both food and energy security as well as climate change and have called for greater co-operation with the UN in these areas. FAO have worked with ASEAN on its Regional Strategy for Food Security and ASEAN have taken part in the July 2007 Asia-Pacific meeting on global climate change organized by ESCAP. Most recently, the ASEAN Secretary-General has worked to formulate ASEAN’s response (and help lead the Asian regional response) to the current global financial crisis, working with the international financial institutions, ESCAP, and others.

On all these issues, there is little ASEAN sensitivity about working closely with the UN. The constraints are more those inherent in the fractured nature of the UN system, and the limited capacity of the ASEAN Secretariat.

e) Peace and security co-operation – Only first steps towards formal co-operation

ASEAN was established as a political and security grouping during the Cold War, according to its founding Bangkok Declaration of 1967, the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration of 1971, and the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation in Southeast Asia agreed in Bali in 1976. Based on these agreements, ASEAN member states are committed to the peaceful settlement of regional inter-state disputes. Two decades ago, ASEAN member states played a leading role in the resolution of the Cambodia conflict. Since ASEAN was established in 1967, there have been no significant armed conflicts between member states. However, ASEAN has been absent from discussions on the Spratly Islands and other small territorial disputes in the ASEAN region.

In 1994, with the support of regional powers, ASEAN established the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which now includes Australia, Canada, the European Union, India, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Russia, and the United States as well as the ten members of ASEAN. The ARF is meant to contribute to regional security through confidence building and preventive diplomacy, and was conceived as the pre-eminent Asian security structure. It has not however attempted to mediate any conflict in the region and is only supported by a small unit in the ASEAN Secretariat. Despite the presence of all the major parties in the ARF, it was not chosen as the framework within which six party talks over the North Korean nuclear issue were conducted.

This year, ASEAN leaders are expected to approve a new blueprint for the attainment of a Political and Security Community by 2015. The blueprint will include objectives on political development, the shaping and sharing of norms; conflict prevention; conflict resolution; post-conflict peace building; and the establishment of necessary implementing mechanisms.

The UN has organized two major peacekeeping operations in the region: in Cambodia in the early 1990s and more recently in East Timor. Indonesia and Malaysia have been important contributors to UN peacekeeping around the world. The UN has also attempted to mediate between the Myanmar Government and opposition since the mid-1990s. Though individual ASEAN members have been involved in all these efforts in various ways, there has been no formal UN-ASEAN collaboration; in the case of UN mediation efforts in Myanmar, there has not even been a formal link between the UN Secretary-General's Special Advisor (working on Myanmar) and ASEAN (Myanmar, whilst accepting the 'good offices' of the UN Secretary-General, has rejected any ASEAN involvement in its internal politics). In Aceh, however, the Indonesian authorities preferred that the UN not be involved: the early stages of the peace process were led not by the UN but by the Centre for

Humanitarian Dialogue and drew upon ASEAN members as part of its monitoring team. And implementation of the peace accord between the Indonesian Government and the Free Aceh Movement was organized through and European Union–ASEAN led mechanism, without the UN’s direct involvement.

The only regular interaction between the UN and ASEAN in the area of peace and security was an annual conference on conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peace building organized regularly between 2001–2006. The conference was jointly organized by the United Nations Department of Political Affairs, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the host country, and the ASEAN Institutes for Strategic and International Studies, with representation from the ASEAN Secretariat. Although some issues raised, such as ASEAN seeking observer status at the UN, have been addressed, there was little follow-up on the discussions or effort to implement the suggestions made each year. UN funding for the conference ended in 2007.

ASEAN is also engaged in consultations with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on ways to ensure compliance with certain provisions of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone Treaty. A 2007 Plan of Action to implement the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapon Free Zone calls for ASEAN to work with the IAEA in developing a legal framework to meet international standards on nuclear safety.

f) Cyclone Nargis and new arrangements for co-operation

Cyclone Nargis, which struck the coastline of Myanmar and killed more than 85,000 people in May 2008, opened a new chapter in ASEAN-UN co-operation. On 30 May 2008, in response to the disaster, ASEAN foreign ministers agreed to establish an ASEAN Humanitarian Task Force under the leadership of ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan to work with the Government of Myanmar in delivering aid to more than two million people in Nargis affected areas. At a subsequent conference in Yangon chaired by the Prime Minister of Myanmar and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, a Tripartite Core Group (TCG) was established between the Government of Myanmar, ASEAN and the UN, to ensure the close coordination of relief and recovery efforts.

During the past six months this mechanism has worked well for organizing aid and resolving any disputes between international aid agencies and the Myanmar Government. Hundreds of millions of dollars worth of emergency aid has been delivered to more than two million people, requiring a monumental logistical effort and constant attention to a complex and shifting political environment.

In June, the TCG organized a large-scale joint assessment of needs in Nargis-affected areas (PONJA). This joint assessment was carried out by teams comprised of hundreds of staff from the UN and the World Bank together

with members of the ASEAN Secretariat and officials from ASEAN Governments, spending days together in remote towns and villages and producing, over a short time period, a rigorous overview of emergency needs. The first periodic review of aid, a three-year framework for recovery (PONREPP), and a study of the social impact of aid, will all be completed by the TCG in December 2008 and presented at the next ASEAN Summit. The TCG's mandate expires in June 2009, but there may be attempts in the near future to ensure that its mandate continues through the period of the three-year recovery framework.

As part of this effort, the ASEAN Secretariat has become operational for the first time. The ASEAN Secretary-General has set up a coordinating office in Yangon under his special representative. ASEAN has worked closely with the World Bank in its TCG efforts and the World Bank has provided both technical advisers and other support directly to ASEAN. The TCG is chaired by the Myanmar deputy foreign minister and includes both the representative of the ASEAN Secretary-General and the UN Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator. The TCG meets on a regular basis (at least weekly) to monitor progress coordinate efforts and, most importantly, address problems or misunderstandings as they arise. The World Bank has provided technical assistance to ASEAN for its work with the TCG.

The model used in Myanmar – of a regional organization-led emergency effort, involving the host Government, the UN, international financial institutions, and international and national non-governmental organizations has been innovative and successful. The particular combination of Regional Organization–World Bank–UN co-operation in moving from emergency response to recovery in a complex political environment is noteworthy. The joint-needs assessment now serves as a model for similar efforts in other disaster areas.

After years of talking about co-operation and modalities for co-operation, we now have, suddenly and unexpectedly, a large, complex, and ongoing joint-operation. It is crucial to ensure and build upon the future success of the TCG. This will mean not only continuing the TCG and its work in Nargis-affected areas with the permission of the Myanmar authorities, but also finding the right institutional and diplomatic formula for longer-term recovery efforts and for possible humanitarian access elsewhere in the country. One challenge will be to attract greater donor funding than has been the case so far (the UN's Flash Appeal remains barely half-met). Whilst this is partly because of the political context of this aid effort (due to poor relations between Myanmar and western donor Governments over human rights and democratization issues), it is also because the successes so far in delivering aid to millions of people, are not properly appreciated, least of all in the international media. ASEAN's catalytic role in this success is even less well known.

Whither ASEAN-UN co-operation?

The agenda of the 14th ASEAN Summit will likely be dominated by issues related to the current global financial crisis including the possible establishment of an Asian Monetary Fund, the implementation of the new charter, including the setting up of the new ASEAN human rights body; the restructuring of the ASEAN Secretariat; the finalization of the ASEAN Social-Cultural Community and ASEAN Political Security Community blueprints (the Economic Community blueprint has already been finalized); as well as new declarations and arrangements on disaster management, energy and food security, and the proposed ASEAN development goals.

Thailand will also host the Third ASEAN-UN Summit, planned for the same week as the ASEAN leaders summit. At their annual meeting in Singapore in July 2008, ASEAN foreign ministers stated their aims to further broaden ASEAN-UN co-operation on a range of issues. These included poverty eradication and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, the prevention and control of infectious diseases, disaster management, trade and investment, and peace and security. The upcoming summit will probably focus on three sets of issues: the Millennium Development Goals and financing for development in the wake of the global economic downturn; disaster management and ongoing Nargis-related efforts in Myanmar; and food and energy security and climate change.

Different parts of the UN system will attempt to work closely with ASEAN on all of these issues, along the lines described above. ESCAP, by far the largest capacity in the region, will seek to play a leadership role on emerging social and economic challenges. In addition, at some stage the UN may develop interaction with the ASEAN human rights body. Few ASEAN Governments would welcome an intrusive human rights mechanism in particular one that was mandated to identify and address ongoing violations. Myanmar has been prominent on the agenda of the UN's Human Rights Council and human rights issues in Myanmar have attracted attention from many civil society groups across the region. ASEAN has set up a High Level Panel to formulate the terms of reference of this body and a first draft of the terms of reference are expected to be submitted at the upcoming summit for further guidance.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) sees the proper establishment of the ASEAN human rights body as its highest priority, in part because Asia remains the only continent with no regional human rights mechanism. Important questions about the new body remain to be answered, including the balance it will strike between promoting human rights (through say education and training programmes) and protecting human rights (through ongoing monitoring and redress), as well as between a focus on

civil and political rights on the one hand and economic, social and cultural rights on the other. The UN's own record of highly politicized human rights debate may provide a sobering example of what to avoid.

Beyond these existing tracks however, this paper suggests four areas of 'new direction' in ASEAN-UN relations:

New directions (1): Building on the success of the post-Nargis Humanitarian Task Force

The first suggestion is simply to ensure the future success of the post-Nargis Humanitarian Task Force in Myanmar and to build on this success in concrete ways. The finalization of the Post-Nargis Recovery and Disaster Response and Preparedness Framework (PONREPP or recovery framework for the next three years), the Period Review (of aid delivery over the past six months), and the Social Impact Study (commissioned by the World Bank to look at the social impact of aid in Nargis-affected areas), is critical. These reports should be presented to a high-level segment of the upcoming summit. ASEAN leaders should commit to continuing this joint effort with the UN and commit (together with the Myanmar Government) to extending the term of the TCG for at least one year beyond its current expiration date of June 2009. An early commitment to an extension of the TCG mandate is essential for raising additional funding for the UN's Flash Appeal and for the PONREPP. ASEAN should also step up efforts to advocate increased funding by major international donors. Many of these donor Governments loudly called for humanitarian access in the immediate aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, with more than one even considering the use of military assets without the permission of the Myanmar Government. Now that access has improved, many (though not all) of these same donor Governments seem uninterested in funding the required response. ASEAN could seek to understand better the reasons behind donor Government reluctance to substantively increase funding and find ways to overcome them.

ASEAN could also seek the permission of the Myanmar Government to expand the work of the TCG to other parts of Myanmar facing extreme humanitarian need, using the same model of co-operation, transparency and accountability. Improved humanitarian access has been a long-standing aim of the international humanitarian community; ASEAN is now well placed to help. The ASEAN secretary-general should be encouraged to work closely with the UN secretary-general and his Emergency Relief Coordinator in this regard. The UN should appoint a senior-level humanitarian envoy with a specific mandate to coordinate efforts with the ASEAN secretariat so as not to lose the momentum of the past months and to maintain the rare humanitarian opening in Myanmar.

During the past few years, and in particular since the Asian Tsunami of 2004, ASEAN has attempted to bolster regional co-operation on disaster preparedness and response. It has formulated (but not fully ratified) the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) which provides for a regional disaster response mechanism. ASEAN Standby Arrangements and

Standard Operating Procedures, which have yet to be made fully operational, also exist. A small interim ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA) has been set up in Jakarta to facilitate co-operation and coordination including with relevant UN bodies.

To strengthen these efforts, OCHA could cooperate with ASEAN in setting up a permanent AHA. OCHA and the AHA could also manage (perhaps with the Myanmar Government Ministry of Social Welfare) a proper evaluation of joint efforts since June 2008 and seek to identify best practices for other complex emergencies.

The UN Secretary-General has recently appointed the first Assistant Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction. This may also be an area in which ASEAN and the UN could work together more closely, especially in Myanmar but also in the many other countries in the region prone to natural disasters.

New directions (2): Revisiting global challenges

Instead of a deep dialogue on regional security challenges it may be better to concentrate on ASEAN's contributions to a future global security agenda as a first step given regional sensitivities. This would have the advantages of shifting the focus to issues less directly tied to ASEAN Member State sovereignty as well having the UN generally benefiting from ASEAN experience and thinking. As mentioned above, ASEAN members have a wealth of experiences on critical issues such as state-building or the links between security and development; over the past few decades, the region has moved from being a cockpit of intra- and inter-state conflict to being one of the most peaceful and prosperous parts of the world. There are lessons to be learned which could benefit global thinking on these and other challenges.

The 2005 World Summit adopted a long work-plan on global challenges for the UN. During the past year, ASEAN has highlighted ongoing development challenges as well as food and energy security (as a result of rising world prices in early 2008), and climate change. However, while discussions are ongoing at different levels about ASEAN-UN co-operation on these challenges, attempts by ASEAN to inform and shape the evolving global agenda have not been taken seriously by the international community. Whilst ASEAN has debated and discussed its reaction to evolving global agendas on issues such as food security and climate change, it has not actively led the formulation of new policy ideas at the global level.

ASEAN's new observer status at the UN General Assembly and the UN's incipient status as a dialogue partner of ASEAN provide a useful watershed to encourage efforts along these lines. ASEAN should also be encouraged to formulate its own thinking on next steps in the strengthening of the UN system or UN reform. In the past two years, Indonesia was a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, and for the next two years, Vietnam has a seat on the Council. This representation in such an important decision

making body of the UN could be used to give voice to ASEAN concerns. ASEAN countries have historically played a marginal role in shaping thinking about UN reform, far less than the European Union or the African Union.

ASEAN could consider, for example, providing collective comments on the thematic reports of the UN Secretary-General presented to the Security Council (such as reports on Conflict Prevention or the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict). The Permanent Missions of the ASEAN Member States at the UN would need to find the best mechanism through which to agree on collective comments, perhaps through the Permanent Mission of the ASEAN chair and with the assistance of an ASEAN Secretariat staff member posted in New York for this purpose.

More generally however, there would need to be a bespoke mechanism, perhaps using the existing ASEAN Institutes for Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) network and the UN University, to develop a joint work programme on evolving global challenges and ways to strengthen the UN system. The ASEAN ISIS network has played an important role in the past as a formulator of ASEAN initiatives and catalyst for bolstering regional co-operation. The UN's existing Dialogue with the Global South which links the UN Secretariat with universities in the developing world could also play a role by seconding UN staff to ASEAN universities to encourage research on UN issues.

New directions (3): Deepening dialogue on peace and security issues

Thirdly, with the finalization of the ASEAN Political and Security Community blueprint, co-operation with the UN on issues related to peace and security in the region cannot be entirely ignored, despite sensitivities. Rather than attempting to build new capacities in areas such as conflict prevention, which in some minds strays into what are seen as internal issues, the initial focus could be on mediation support. The UN's main political role in the region is its mediation efforts in Myanmar, and mediation is one issue in which ASEAN has had some experience. Moreover, under the new ASEAN charter, the ASEAN Secretary-General is given the authority to use his good offices to mediate disputes on request; the ASEAN secretariat is currently not configured or resourced to play this function.

ASEAN and DPA could jointly revisit holding conflict prevention seminars geared towards a yearly work-plan, designed to help inform implementation of the Political and Security Community blueprint. More specifically, the ASEAN secretariat could work with the DPA Mediation Support Unit on lessons-learned studies from the region, as well as from other regions where relevant and instructive, as a first step towards more substantive capacity building. Research by private non-governmental organizations could be supported and harnessed through joint workshops and published studies. The ASEAN secretariat might observe the different ways in which the UN and the Africa Union collaborate closely on issues of politics and security without infringing on sovereignty.

There is also a need to build up a global mediation capacity among ASEAN Governments. Whereas many European, Latin American, and African diplomats routinely act as UN mediators in crises outside their continent (for example former Nigerian foreign minister Ibrahim Gambari on Myanmar), few Asian diplomats (and no one from ASEAN) currently works as a UN mediator anywhere. Whilst there may be many reasons for this, it is at least in the UN's interest to have a good pool of potential global mediators from within the ranks of ASEAN foreign services. The UN's Department of Political Affairs could work with the ASEAN Secretariat to see what joint-programmes (for example developing graining capacity and familiarizing diplomats with the UN's work in complex emergencies around the world) could help to develop a proper pool.

New directions (4) Enhancing secretariat-secretariat co-operation

Fourthly, the 2007 Memorandum of Understanding between the ASEAN and UN secretariats provides the framework for a more concrete partnership. Both ASEAN and the UN have complex and active inter-governmental mechanisms that produce declarations and agreements on a regular basis. The crucial difference between the two is that the UN is a large bureaucracy, whereas ASEAN has a small bureaucratic component. Under the ASEAN Charter there will be an upgrading of ASEAN secretariat capacity. During this transition phase, there is no real substitute for UN staff stationed in the region specifically tasked with strengthening secretariat-to-secretariat co-operation.

Both secretariats should strengthen and rationalize their liaison functions with each other in New York, Bangkok as the regional headquarters of the UN, and Jakarta, where the ASEAN secretariat is located. At minimum, the Department of Political Affairs should be represented in Bangkok to complement the existing regional presences in the Development, Economic and Social, Humanitarian, and Human Rights fields (and the regional offices of UNDP, OCHA and OHCHR as well as ESCAP). A UN liaison officer should also be posted in Jakarta perhaps not as part of a separate UN liaison office (as is the case with the liaison office to the African Union in Addis Ababa) but placed within the ASEAN Secretariat to assist the Secretariat in all aspects of its dealings with the UN system. This could initially be cast in terms of capacity building, as opposed to a formal structural relationship. Electoral technical support on demand could be one area that the ASEAN secretariat could look in shaping its future direction. There is much experience and expertise the UN secretariat can provide in this respect.

4 | Conclusion

It is hoped that the foregoing analysis and suggestions for new directions in the ASEAN-UN relationship will promote a constructive discussion among policy makers and help officials from both the UN and ASEAN member states develop a stronger basis for co-operation. Understandably, there will be those who worry about over-reaching and would prefer to situate the discussion in a realistic and therefore modest framework of possibilities. However, as this paper has stressed, the surprising success of the joint ASEAN-UN response to Cyclone Nargis indicates a realm of possibility hitherto unimagined. With the ASEAN Charter's speedy ratification, one of the world's most successful regional associations has become a more substantive legal and political entity. It is only right and proper that the collective voice of the ten countries of Southeast Asia resonates more loudly and effectively on important global issues, and closer and more formal co-operation with the UN will ensure this is the case.

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