

# ASEAN And Regional Security In East Asia

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite all its weaknesses, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has arguably played a significant role in shaping and contributing to regional security in Southeast Asia and beyond. Even though it has not ridden itself completely from sources of conflicts and tension, Southeast Asia has enjoyed a rather long period of peace and stability. By the 1990s, ASEAN had managed to incorporate former “enemies” such as Vietnam and Laos into the grouping, and even completed the idea of ASEAN-10 with the admission of Cambodia and Myanmar as members. Indeed, within Southeast Asia, ASEAN has played a central role in ensuring that war is no longer an acceptable instrument of conflict resolution among its members. The focus of inter-state relations among regional countries soon turned into regional economic cooperation and building trust.

ASEAN’s security role has also extended beyond Southeast Asia. After the end of the Cold War, ASEAN managed to maintain its relevance by embracing the process, and taking an active part in shaping the post-Cold War regional security architecture in East Asia. It managed to place itself at the centre of multilateral security arrangements in East Asia, which links the two sub-regions of Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia. This has been well demonstrated in the proliferation of ASEAN-based multilateral institutions in the region since 1993, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) process, and the East Asian Summit (EAS). Consequently, ASEAN-based multilateral institutions have become one of two main pillars of regional

security architecture in East Asia. The other pillar is the bilateral alliance system led by the United States (US).<sup>1</sup>

East Asia, however, has always been a dynamic region constantly characterised by challenges. The future of regional security has now increasingly been shaped and influenced by two key developments: the inevitable emergence of China and India as major powers and the growing salience of non-traditional security (NTS) problems. While the first development would bring about a major geostrategic shift in East Asia, the second development complicates the security challenges facing the region. As such, ASEAN faces an increasingly more complex strategic environment within which its security role will be tested. If ASEAN wants to maintain its relevance and role in a rapidly changing East Asia, it is imperative for the association to consolidate itself.

This article discusses the challenges facing ASEAN's role in managing East Asian regional security within the context of a set of challenges associated with the emergence of a new regional order. The discussion is divided into three sections. The first section describes the strategies and principles employed by ASEAN in managing regional security over the last four decades. The second section examines the new challenges that could erode ASEAN's role as a manager of regional order. The third section suggests some practical measures that ASEAN needs to take in order to maintain its role as a security actor in East Asia.

## ASEAN AS A MANAGER OF REGIONAL ORDER: STRATEGIES AND PRINCIPLES

When it was established in August 1967, ASEAN constituted an experiment at ensuring regional security through an agreement to create a regional order which permitted member countries to pay more attention to, and devote their resources for, the more pressing task of internal consolidation and economic development. This approach to regional security had served member countries well. Indeed, the preservation of regional stability and the maintenance of internal order allowed ASEAN countries to achieve remarkable

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<sup>1</sup> See William Tow and Brendan Taylor, "What Is Regional 'Security Architecture?'" , paper prepared for the ISA 2008 Annual Conference, San Francisco, 26-29 March 2008, p. 2.

achievements in accelerating domestic economic development. As ASEAN's confidence grew, the association began to extend its security role beyond Southeast Asia. With the establishment of the ARF in 1993, the APT in 1997, and the EAS in 2005, regional order in East Asia was increasingly characterised by ASEAN-centred processes. Indeed, through these initiatives, ASEAN managed to position itself as a manager of regional order of some sort, not only within Southeast Asia but also in the wider East Asian region.

ASEAN's transformation from a modest sub-regional association into an organisation that underpinned multilateral process in East Asia reflected its relative success in coping with security challenges, both within Southeast Asia and beyond. ASEAN's approach to security has never been driven by an overriding concern over a single issue.<sup>2</sup> Since its inception in August 1967, ASEAN has always approached security matters in a comprehensive manner. For Southeast Asian countries, security has always encompassed wide arrays of issues in social, cultural, economic, political, and military fronts. Problems in those areas—especially within the domestic context—are seen to have the potential to destabilise nation-states and regional peace and security. Based on such a conception of security, ASEAN has always distinguished security in terms of traditional and non-traditional threats. However, until very recently, ASEAN countries tended to see non-traditional security issues primarily as domestic problems of member states, which required national solutions. The growing salience of non-traditional problems since the end of the Cold War, however, forced ASEAN to recognise the importance of inter-state cooperation in dealing with such issues.

In resolving regional security issues, both at national and regional levels, ASEAN from the outset undertook two interrelated approaches. First, threats from non-traditional security problems were left to individual member states to resolve, especially through nation-building measures. Second, to enable individual states to resolve those problems, regional cooperation is necessary to

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<sup>2</sup> The following analysis is partly drawn from Rizal Sukma, "ASEAN, Regional Security and the Role of the United States: A view from Southeast Asia", Paper Presented at Conference on "A New Horizon for Japan's Security Policy: Basic Concepts and Framework", Institute for International Policy Studies (IIPS), Tokyo, 30 November-1 December 2004.

create a peaceful external environment so that states would not be distracted from domestic priorities. These approaches later evolved into a strategy of building regional resilience, a conception influenced by Indonesia's thinking of *ketahanan nasional* (national resilience). Such thinking postulates that "if each member nation can accomplish an overall national development and overcome internal threats, regional resilience will automatically result much in the same way as a chain derives its overall strength from the strength of its constituent parts".<sup>3</sup> In other words, ASEAN believed that the management of inter-state relations in the region should be founded on the sanctity of national sovereignty of its member states. Regional cooperation was sought in order to reinforce, not erode, that sovereignty.

Despite its appearing to be inward looking, ASEAN's strategy to nurture and maintain regional security did not ignore the role of external powers. Indeed, during the Cold War, Southeast Asia had always been a theatre for rivalries and competition among major powers, notably China, the US, and the Soviet Union. Aware of such reality, however, ASEAN sought to limit the negative effects of rivalries among major power on the region. ASEAN also maintains its preference for regional solutions to regional problems, and agreed that the presence of foreign military bases is temporary in nature. In 1971, ASEAN declared the region as a Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), and in 1995, the region was declared as a nuclear free zone (SEANWFZ). For the most part of the Cold War period, however, these measures served as no more than declaration of intent. Due to differences in security interests of ASEAN member states, the role of major powers remained a significant factor in the security of the region. For example, it has been acknowledged, "since the end of World War II, the U.S. has provided Southeast Asia with a security umbrella that has been a stabilising factor for the development of the region."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jusuf Wanandi, "Security Issues in the ASEAN Region", in Karl D. Jackson and M. Hadi Soesastro, eds., *ASEAN Security and Economic Development*, Research Papers and Policy Studies no. 11 (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1984), p. 305.

<sup>4</sup> Tommy Koh, "Southeast Asia", in Kim Kyung-won, Tommy Koh, and Farooq Sobhan, *America's Role in Asia: Asian Views* (San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, 2004), p. 38.

With the end of the Cold War, ASEAN's approach to regional security began to change. First, while some ASEAN countries began to be more flexible, the notion of sovereignty as the basis for regional cooperation remains paramount. For example, ASEAN has recognised the imperative for cooperation among member states to resolve domestic problems with cross-border effects. Such an acknowledgment, however, is more visible among the old members of ASEAN, especially Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. However, the principle of non-interference is still jealously guarded by ASEAN states. Second, ASEAN countries continue to believe that security challenges facing the region are numerous and take multiple forms, especially in non-traditional forms. For most Southeast Asian countries, the threat of terrorism is but one problem alongside other security problems such as extreme poverty, transnational crimes, piracy, children and women trafficking, communal violence, and separatism. On the traditional front, ASEAN is also concerned with the situation in the South China Sea, bilateral territorial disputes among ASEAN member states, and the possible rivalry among major powers. Third, in coping with security challenges, ASEAN believes that multilateral approaches would be more realistic and more beneficial to both regional and extra-regional players.

Indeed, ASEAN has played an instrumental role in instituting a multilateral security framework in Asia-Pacific. The creation of the ARF is a testament for that. With ASEAN's role as a primary driving force, the ARF serves as the only multilateral forum for security cooperation in the region, involving not only Southeast Asian, South Asian, and Northeast Asian countries, but more importantly also Russia and the US. Through the ARF, member countries are expected to seek and attain national security with, not against, the regional partners. ASEAN also expects the ARF to serve as a constructive venue for major powers—especially China, Japan, and the US—to engage each other in a spirit of cooperation. Indeed, for ASEAN, the ARF—despite its shortcomings—serves as a venue through which its security interests, and the interests of extra-regional powers, could be best attained.

Within ASEAN itself, member countries have begun to deepen their cooperation in political and security areas. During the 9th Summit in 2003 in Bali, Indonesia, ASEAN leaders reached an important agreement to work closely in order to transform the

association into a security community by 2020. In the Bali Concord II, ASEAN leaders affirmed that the ASEAN Security Community (ASC) “is envisaged to bring ASEAN’s political and security cooperation to a higher plane to ensure that countries in the region live at peace with one another and with the world at large in a just, democratic and harmonious environment”.<sup>5</sup> The agreement reflects ASEAN’s commitment to create a community of nations at peace with one another and at peace with the world, characterised not only by the absence of war, but also by the absence of the prospect of war among ASEAN member states. It is expected that the ASC—which was later modified into an ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC)—would strengthen ASEAN’s commitment to resolve conflicts and disputes through depoliticised means of legal instruments and mechanisms, and through other peaceful means.<sup>6</sup>

For more than five decades, the success of ASEAN’s security role has been supported by six principles of cooperation adhered to by the association.<sup>7</sup> First, ASEAN had from the outset avoided tackling “sensitive” issues in its agenda of cooperation. Indeed, for more than two decades since its inception in August 1967, explicit reference to security cooperation had been conspicuously absent in the agenda of ASEAN. Despite the political and security background of its establishment, ASEAN had tended to avoid the necessity for deeper and more institutionalised political and security cooperation. While it sets out the task of promoting “regional peace and stability” and strengthening “the foundation for a prosperous and peaceful community of Southeast Asian nations”, the Bangkok Declaration clearly reflects the belief in “the economic road towards peace”. Indeed, cooperation was only deemed necessary on “matters of common interest in the economic,

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<sup>5</sup> The Bali Concord II, Bali, Indonesia, 7 October 2003.

<sup>6</sup> An analysis on the challenges facing ASEAN in realising such an ideal can be found in Carolina Hernandez, “The Current State of ASEAN Political-Security Cooperation: Problems and Prospects in Forming an ASEAN Security Community”, paper presented at the Fourth U.N.-ASEAN Conference on *Conflict Prevention, Conflict Resolution, and Peace Building in Southeast Asia: ASEAN Security Community and the U.N.*, Jakarta, 23-25 February 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Analysis on ASEAN’s principles of cooperation is drawn from Rizal Sukma, “Trust-Building in East Asia: The Case of ASEAN”, paper presented at Conference on “Regional Cooperation: Experience in Europe and Practice in East Asia”, organised by KAS and CISS, Beijing, 10-11 October 2006.

social, cultural, technical, scientific and administrative fields.” In other words, cooperation among ASEAN states began on the non-sensitive areas.

Second, the focus on economic cooperation, however, does not mean that ASEAN completely ignored the imperative of managing political and security problems among member states. Indeed, it has been noted, “the necessity to co-operate [among ASEAN countries] is deemed a function of a ‘hostile’ environment”<sup>8</sup> both in domestic and external context. The presence of common interests in economic development did not result in a fierce inter-state competition. On the contrary, the governments of Southeast Asia saw the necessity to create a regional order which would permit member countries to pay more attention to, and devote their resources for, the more pressing task of internal consolidation and development. Such an objective necessitated a friendly relationship among regional countries, which was sought through the adherence to the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs as the primary means of conflict prevention. In other words, political and security problems were managed through a strict adherence to the principle of non-interference.

Third, in addressing political and security matters, ASEAN member states preferred a bilateral approach rather than a multilateral one, and through quiet diplomacy. Indeed, the notion of quiet diplomacy in the Southeast Asian context has often been defined in terms of “the ASEAN Way”. It has been argued, for example, that the principle of quiet diplomacy forms a significant element of the so-called ASEAN Way.<sup>9</sup> Through this approach, “each member refrains from criticising the policies of others in public” and this, in turn, “allows the ASEAN members to subdue any bilateral tensions.”<sup>10</sup> When problem occurred between member states, governments did not air their differences in public. Instead, they worked closely, often behind the closed door, to iron out those differences, and tried their best to keep the media out of

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<sup>8</sup> Zakaria Haji Ahmad, “The World of ASEAN Decision-Makers: A Study of Bureaucratic Elite Perceptions in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 8, no. 3, December 1986, p. 204.

<sup>9</sup> Hiro Katsumata, “Reconstruction of Diplomatic Norms in Southeast Asia: The Case of Strict Adherence to the ASEAN Way”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 25, No. 1, April 2003, p. 107.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



the process. More importantly, ASEAN countries strictly refrained themselves from commenting on each other's domestic issues or internal situation.

Fourth, the quiet diplomacy practiced by ASEAN should also be understood within the context of the association's preference for informality in managing conflict and dispute-settlement. Even though a formal mechanism for conflict management and conflict resolution is provided for by the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), ASEAN has never used it. Instead, ASEAN member states prefer to manage disputes "outside the parameters of formal structures and institutions",<sup>11</sup> especially in managing bilateral territorial disputes. As one scholar has aptly argued, "ASEAN was not about formal dispute settlement or conflict resolution *per se*, but rather about creating a regional milieu in which such problems either did not arise or could be readily managed and contained."<sup>12</sup> In other words, ASEAN was also a process of conflict avoidance or prevention.

Fifth, informality became more effective when leaders developed closer personal ties. Within ASEAN, leaders or governments of member states or conflicting parties employed the quiet diplomacy as a means of managing conflict, not by an "outside" third party institution. As such, it depended greatly on the personal relationship among the leaders themselves. Indeed, during the first two decades since its inception, ASEAN has provided a venue for leaders of member states, especially among the original fives,<sup>13</sup> to forge close personal ties. The institutionalisation of the summit on an annual basis has also helped strengthen personal ties among ASEAN leaders.

Sixth, ASEAN cooperation progresses at a pace comfortable to all. Despite the need for greater cooperation, ASEAN leaders continued to adopt a gradual approach to cooperation in order to develop a sense of comfort among member states. For example, it took one decade before ASEAN convened its first summit in 1976. More importantly, the inclusion of political and security

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<sup>11</sup> Mely Caballero-Anthony, "Mechanisms of Dispute Settlement: The ASEAN Experience", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 20, no. 1, April 1998, p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Leifer, *The ASEAN Regional Forum: Extending ASEAN's Model of Regional Security*, Adelphi paper No. 302 (London: IISS, 1996), p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> The term "original fives" is used to refer to the founders of ASEAN, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines.



cooperation as an official agenda of ASEAN cooperation only took place in 1992, almost 25 years after its establishment. Again, by focusing cooperation more on “non-sensitive” areas, ASEAN managed to develop a habit of cooperation and trust among member states that would expectedly allow the gradual inclusion of sensitive issues into formal cooperation. The same principle has also been used as the basis of security cooperation by the ARF.

## A NEW CHALLENGE: COPING WITH THE IMPLICATIONS OF STRATEGIC CHANGES

The strategies and principles described above have served ASEAN well for more than four decades. However, the East Asia region has been increasingly subject to pressures emanating from strategic changes in major power relationship in East Asia, with significant implications not only for regional security but also for the role of ASEAN in the region. Within the current context, ASEAN’s role in fostering the habit of cooperation and in mitigating hostile behaviour among its members needs to be acknowledged. However, the utility and merits of ASEAN’s model of multilateral security cooperation among non-ASEAN participants has increasingly been questioned. Its efforts in extending the so-called ASEAN model of cooperation into the wider Asia-Pacific context are still far from being effective. Indeed, while ASEAN remains relevant for addressing transnational security challenges in the region, it is not clear if the ASEAN model would be able to cope with security challenges in the wider East Asian region, especially in addressing the challenges brought about by the changing power relationship among major powers.

In this context, there are three challenges facing ASEAN. The first is how to position itself properly in a changing strategic relationship among major powers, especially in US-China-Japan relations. The current dynamics in the US-China-Japan triangle clearly demonstrate the emergence of a new regional order in the Asia-Pacific region. The relationship among these three major powers in the region will continue to be a complex one. While the three countries are seeking to establish cooperative relations among themselves, signs of emerging competition are also evident. China, clearly a rising power with its own interests, seems to see Japan and the US as two powers that might pose a

limit to its regional pre-eminence. Japan is anxious about policy direction that China might take in the future; a feeling shared by some ASEAN countries, including Indonesia. Meanwhile, the US is clearly opposed to the rise of a new power that might pose a challenge to the country's pre-eminence in the region. Managing the uncertainties in the future direction of major power relations, therefore, serves as a major challenge for ASEAN.

The second challenge is how to respond to the rise of China. Over the last ten years or so, China has consistently demonstrated its ability to sustain economic growth at an impressive rate higher than those of its Southeast Asian neighbours. Along with its economic development, China's military capability has also improved significantly vis-à-vis Southeast Asian countries. The concern with China relates primarily to the question of how Beijing is going to use its new stature and influence in achieving its national interests and objectives in the region. Moreover, in economic terms, it is not yet clear whether China would become a competitor or a partner to ASEAN states. However, it is important to note that China has repeatedly assured regional states that its rise would be peaceful and China would continue to play a positive role for the stability and security of the region.

The third challenge points to the need for a new regional architecture that could remedy the problems and weaknesses of the ASEAN-driven model of Asia's current security architecture. Indeed, the most fundamental weakness lies in the uncertainty regarding its future viability. The ASEAN-driven processes are not comprehensive enough to address strategic challenges in the region. Is it capable of accommodating the rise of China and the emergence of India? Would it continue to assure the prominent place of Japan and the US as existing crucial players in the region? Would it continue to guarantee that the interests of lesser powers would be served? Are the existing structures of the architecture strong enough? It has been acknowledged "there is a persistent perception that they are not, that the security burden is too heavy for the structures the architects have given us."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Smith, "Regional Security: Is 'Architecture' All We Need?", *Policy Analysis Brief* (The Stanley Foundation, December 2007), p. 4.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE IMPERATIVE OF CHANGE

If that is the case, the region needs an architecture that will guarantee that relationship among major powers—the US, China, Japan, and India—would be primarily cooperative rather than competitive. It should prevent strategic rivalry among the four major powers from becoming the main feature of regional relations. At the same time, it should also prevent the emergence of a concert of powers among the four powers at the expense of other lesser powers in the region. The current ASEAN-driven processes or system has not yet provided such guarantee. Various changes and strategic re-alignments in the relationship among the major powers, because of global transformation and regional power shift, have the potential to marginalise the central role of ASEAN within the current security architecture. Northeast Asian countries, for example, have begun their efforts at laying the foundation for regional security cooperation of their own. It is not clear also whether the ASEAN-based regional security institutions—the ARF, the APT, and the EAS—would be adequate for coping with future uncertainties resulting from strategic power shifts—because of the rise of China and India—currently taking place in East Asia.

ASEAN, therefore, needs to embark upon new initiatives to maintain its relevance. Unfortunately, ASEAN itself is in a deep crisis in facing the ongoing strategic transformation. Even though ASEAN leaders, on the initiative by Indonesia, have agreed to consolidate and strengthen ASEAN's cohesiveness through the promise of an ASEAN Community, the process towards that direction is still fraught with difficulty and uncertainty. Different levels of economic development, and diversity in political system, would lead to more divergent interests among ASEAN members. The ugly face of Burma has also undermined ASEAN's image further. All these problems have in turn undermined ASEAN's credibility. If these unfortunate trends continue, then it is likely that great powers would begin to look beyond ASEAN in their efforts to craft a new security architecture best suited to their individual and common strategic interests. If a great-powers-driven security architecture becomes a reality, ASEAN would soon find itself in the passenger's seat.

What should ASEAN do in order to maintain its relevance as a security actor in a rapidly changing strategic environment in East Asia? As things stand today, ASEAN has no other choice but to strengthen its commitment to implement what it has already pledged to do. First, it is imperative for ASEAN to improve the ASEAN Charter. After five years, the ASEAN Charter allows a review to be undertaken, and ASEAN needs to take this opportunity to refine the Charter. Stronger emphasis on the mechanism for ensuring compliance, for example, needs to be made. It is also important for ASEAN to seriously consider the mechanism for interactions with elements of civil society so that the promise to become a people-centred ASEAN can be fulfilled.

Second, ASEAN needs to take into account the complaints by non-ASEAN powers with regard to the ARF. In this regard, ASEAN should take more initiatives to bring the whole cooperation into more concrete areas. The current focus on how ARF countries could cooperate to manage natural disasters is an important starting point. However, other concrete areas of cooperation need to be expanded also. Cooperation on maritime security, for example, can be expanded further. So can cooperation on other non-traditional security issues.

Third, ASEAN should begin to realise that its future role will depend on how deep intra-ASEAN cooperation can be realised. In this regard, the ASEAN Political and Security Community Blueprint has provided a great opportunity for ASEAN to really consolidate itself. Therefore, as Indonesia has made clear, it is imperative for ASEAN to implement the document rather than trying to come up with new declarations or joint communiqués in the future. It is time for implementation, not for new vision or ideals.

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