Affinity and Trust in Southeast Asia: A Regional Survey

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An earlier version of this paper was presented at the ASEAN 40th Anniversary Conference, "Ideas and Institutions: Building an ASEAN Community?" jointly organized by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), in Singapore on 31 July – 1 August 2007.

Events such as the haze, SARS, and the 2004 Tsunami are reminders of the increasing interdependence of regional security. Recognizing this emerging interdependence, some prominent members of the scholarly and political elite in the Southeast Asian countries have become advocates of a more institutionalized political, economic and cultural identity in the region. In building on the works of Karl Deutsch and Amitav Acharya, *inter alia*,[2] the perceived necessity of such "comprehensive integration" was most influentially advocated by Rizal Sukma—at the behest of the Indonesian Foreign Ministry—with the direct result of ASEAN's proposal in October 2003 to forge an "ASEAN community". This chapter seeks to outline the challenges and prospects regarding the proposal and its goal to foster a "regional identity".[3] Despite the enlightened aspirations behind the proposal, the primary challenges raised by the analysis involve continued distrust, suspicion over the motivations behind institutional reform in ASEAN, and the various political and normative divisions that have exacerbated such reservations.

Research Approach and Methodology

To provide a rudimentary set of indicators regarding the extent of integration and community in ASEAN, the author conducted fourteen field trips to all ten of the ASEAN countries between May 2004 and July 2007. During this time, over 100 in-depth interviews were conducted together with two sets of surveys that were alternatively designed for respondents at the elite and communal levels. In both cases, the surveys were designed to test perceptions of "self" and "other" along with the extent of community in Southeast Asia.[4] Pilot studies for both surveys were conducted and approval was sought and obtained from the UNSW@ADFA Research And Ethics Committee. In the case of the "elite" sample, 100 surveys involving 50 questions were conducted, with 38 of the respondents from government and 38 from academia. Meanwhile, and in the case of the communal survey, a "cluster

sample"[5] of 819 surveys (55 questions), in seven languages, was conducted in all the ASEAN capital cities except Yangon.[6] A primary limitation to the elite survey regarded the small sample of respondents from Brunei and Myanmar as well as—despite best attempts to the contrary—a complete absence of government respondents from Singapore. While all due care has been taken to provide an accurate survey of regional perceptions, the fact that the communal level survey was conducted in the capital cities of ASEAN has undoubtedly meant that the relatively more affluent and educated citizens of the region were sampled. Consequently, the true extent of regional affinity and trust is likely to be somewhat lower than indicated below. In the case of the elite level survey sample, the influence of bias cannot be ruled out due to the political culture of some countries. Nevertheless, various insights from the elite interview work assisted to provide some contextualization to these data.

**Affinity and Knowledge amidst the Southeast Asian People**

For the purpose of investigating the degree of affinity between the communities of Southeast Asia, an early question in the "communal survey" asked "which of the following countries form a part of your region?" In outlining the results, Figure 1 indicates a relatively strong differentiation and knowledge between the countries that could be more correctly perceived as a part of Southeast Asia and those countries that are not. For example, on average, at least 40% of the respondents recognized the "ASEAN" countries to be a part of their region. However, at a level of analysis where the data has been separated by "country", what is interesting is that the notion of region within the survey sample is yet to extend beyond the neighbouring countries of each respondent. For example, with Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos and Malaysia, a "yes" score of 60% was only reached in the case of their neighbouring countries. Meanwhile, the countries that demonstrated the narrowest understanding of "region" were Brunei, Myanmar and the Philippines while the broadest notion of the ASEAN region was ingrained within Singapore and Vietnam. In the case of the Vietnamese respondents, all the ASEAN countries were selected.

Figure 1. 'Which of the Following Countries Form a Part of Your Region?'
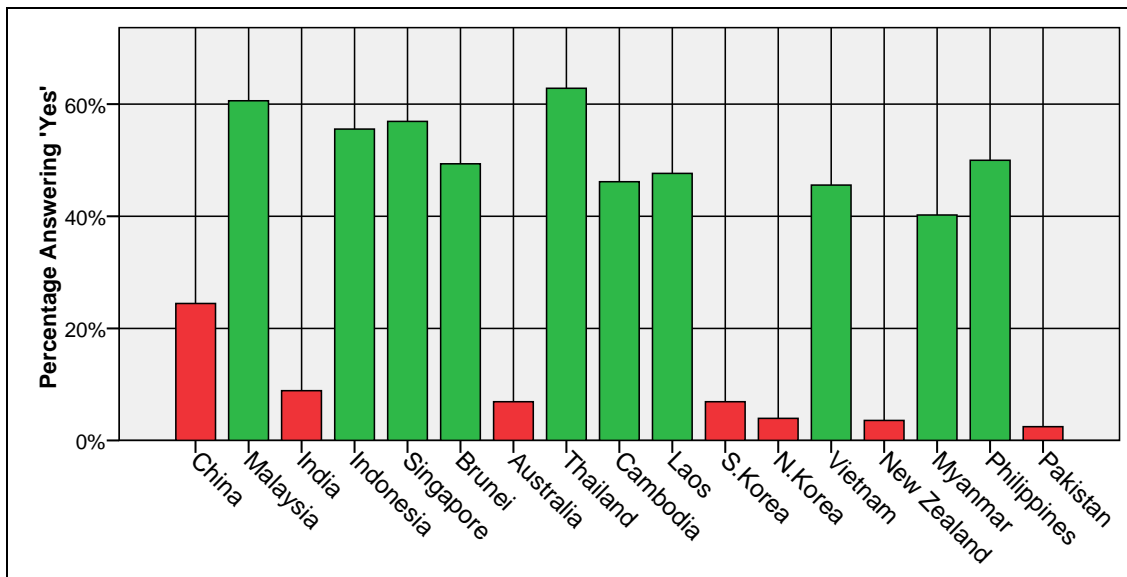
Meanwhile, and as illustrated in Figure 2, 52.1% of "communal" respondents considered themselves to have either a "very good" or "reasonable" knowledge of ASEAN. More specifically, 7.6% stated "I know it very well" while 44.6% stated "I know it reasonably well". However, 38.4% of respondents indicated that they didn't really know what ASEAN does and 8.3% stated that they had never heard of the association prior to participating in the survey. More specifically, and while no individual country had a significant frequency of response (mode) for the option that "they knew ASEAN very well", the countries who felt they "understood ASEAN reasonably well" were Laos (41.9%), Cambodia (42.5%), the Philippines (52.3%), Indonesia (52.3%) and Vietnam (52.8%). The countries with the highest frequency of responses for those who "didn't feel that they really knew what ASEAN does" (but had at least heard of the association) were Myanmar, Thailand (35.4%), Singapore (50.8%), Malaysia (56.1%) and Brunei (58.3%). To varying degrees, these figures provide added weight to the importance of ASEAN's plan to implement a greater level of education about ASEAN in the schools of Southeast Asia.

Figure 2. 'Please select a category that best describes your knowledge of ASEAN:'
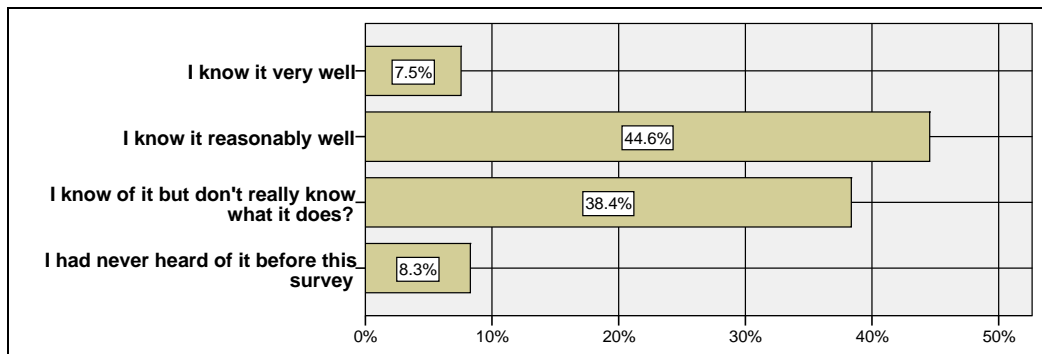

Perceptions of Trust, Conflict and Institutional Reform

The survey also examined the level of trust in the region. In one question, the respondents were asked if they could trust all the Southeast Asian countries to be "good neighbours". While 37.5% of the "communal survey" respondents said that they could trust all the ASEAN countries, of some concern was that 36.1% were "unsure" while 26.4% answered "no" to the question. Interestingly, when the data was filtered to only "yes" or "no" answers regarding "trust", 56.9% indicated "yes" while 43.1% indicated "no". As indicated in Figure 3, the three countries that were the most *distrusting* were Myanmar, Singapore and Indonesia.

However, the most disconcerting statistics arose from the respondents within the "elite survey" sample. When forced to provide only a "yes" or "no" answer to the question of "trust", 59.8 % of regional elites said they couldn't trust other countries in Southeast Asia to be "good neighbours". Furthermore, when the sample was split between the "government" respondents and the "academic" respondents, it was the academics who were the most cynical with 66.7% answering "no" to the question of trust.

Figure 3. 'Do you believe you can trust all the Southeast Asian countries to be good neighbours?
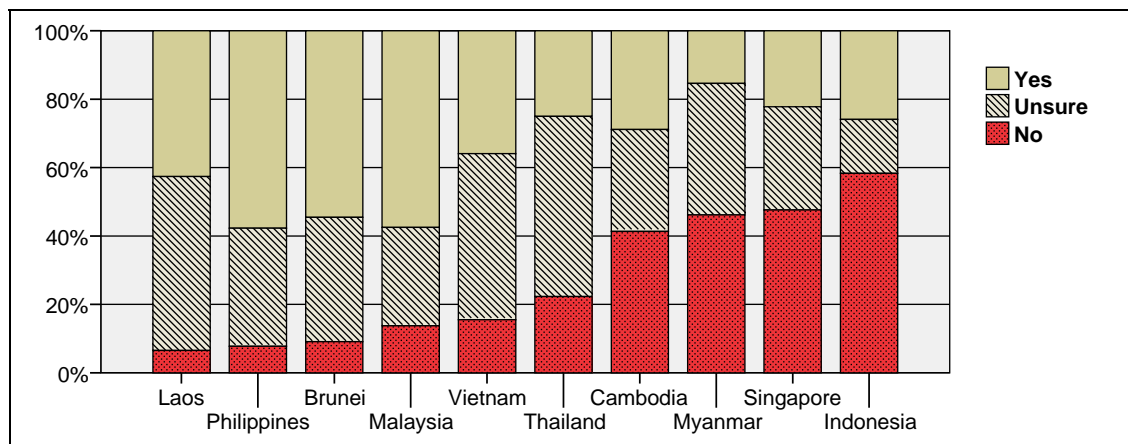
When the elites were asked whether they could envisage any circumstances leading to armed conflict between two or more ASEAN states during the course of next twenty years, 50% of them indicated "no" while 22.3% answered "yes" and a further 27.7% were "unsure". The results are similarly differentiated over the question of whether the principle of non-interference is as important now as it was a decade ago. For this question 46.7% responded "yes", 39.1% "no" and 14.1% were "unsure". Interestingly, the percentage of "yes" responses for the question rose to 61.1% in the case of "government" respondents and to 75% for the category of elites who indicated—in a separate question—"democracy was not personally important". Significantly, 54.8% of the "elite" sample selected "yes" on the issue of whether diplomatic interventions could be justified between the ASEAN states. More specifically, when the data was split between "academic" respondents and "government" respondents, 66.7% of academics and 50% of government officers thought that "diplomatic interventions" could be justified.

While some of the statistics above may lend support to Donald Emmerson's claim that the greatest challenge to ASEAN's identity lies in the possible emergence of a democratic/authoritarian divide,[7] such an ideational divide is more significantly illustrated through a "qualitative" analysis of elite perceptions regarding Indonesia's proposal for a security community. For the purpose of implementing the proposal, Indonesia circulated a draft "Plan of Action" to its ASEAN counterparts in February 2004. Controversially, the plan contained 75 concrete steps, including a proposal for a regional peacekeeping force along

with the interdependent themes of "human rights" and "democracy". These ideals represented such a radical departure from the traditional *modus operandi* of ASEAN that the language had to be significantly watered down and the plan for a peacekeeping force aborted.[8] The contentious nature of the proposal was also demonstrated by the level of cynicism in the ASEAN Secretariat and some of the ASEAN states regarding the origins and motivations behind the proposal. Thus, and according to one senior official in the ASEAN Secretariat, the proposal was perceived to be so unfeasible that he interpreted it as an excuse for Indonesia to walk away from ASEAN by demanding agreement over something to which it knew the other member states would reject.[9] Beyond the Secretariat, some more cynically suggested that it had been induced by the United States for the purpose of its "war on terror".

Despite the initial cynicism articulated by some of the elite in interview, a positive statistic to arise from the "elite" sample was the fact that 75.9% believe—rhetorically at least—that the security community proposal will "benefit Southeast Asia and its people". Nonetheless, such optimism needs to be qualified by the fact that 42.1% of the respondents from government thought that a security community could exist amidst the possibility of armed conflict. Furthermore, while it may be true that recent references to "democracy", "human rights" and other developments—such as Myanmar—reflect an evolution in the norms of ASEAN,[10] the collective picture generated by the research indicates that such a phenomenon has unevenly developed. Consequently, the strongest advocates of change have been the more democratic countries—e.g., the Philippines—while the less democratic countries have been the most critical of such change. In this regard, another officer from the ASEAN Secretariat explained that there have been two interpretations of the meaning of democracy.[11] Thus, and by the account of a senior scholar from Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "the Bali Concord does not mean a common concept of democracy … it was [advocated] in relation to the political development of the region".[12]

Conclusions

As stated, the study was designed to provide some basic indicators of the extent of "community" experienced by the region's people and elite. Further, the brevity of the paper has meant that only a small sample of the 105 questions asked by the two survey designs could be addressed. Nevertheless, a number of general impressions seem apparent. For the communal respondents, there was little statistical correlation between the period of

membership in ASEAN and questions regarding "ASEAN knowledge" or the concept of an "ASEAN region". Furthermore, the timeframe for membership in ASEAN has also not significantly affected the extent of trust between the communities and the elite of Southeast Asia. In reality, the history of *negative interaction* experienced between some ASEAN states may continue to influence and explain the percentages of mistrust indicated in some of the countries—e.g., Indonesia and Singapore.

Meanwhile, the emergence of a possible democratic/authoritarian divide is inhibiting the potential for a collective identity. This divide has exacerbated the extent of mistrust and misunderstanding over the notion of a "security community" and has limited the prospects for a regional community on the basis of the "we-feeling" approach. Consequently, and until the extent of economic development and institutional capacity improves in some countries, the likelihood of political reform and the prospects for foreign policy coordination and interest harmonization will remain low. Over the longer term, and given the relatively higher levels of trust displayed at the communal level, a bottom-up process of community building may be equally important to embedding a sense of community in ASEAN and Southeast Asia. In order to provide support to this process, ASEAN may wish to establish a facility to undertake a larger and more representative survey of regional perceptions with the capacity to report identifiable issues that require further attention. Nevertheless, and in order to avoid the trappings of disillusionment, it should be accepted that the process of embedding a sense of community and regional identity will likely occur over the course of many decades rather than by ASEAN's current goal of 2015.

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[2] Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (London: Routledge, 2001); Karl W. Deutsch *et al.*, *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organisation in the Light of Historical Experience* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1957).

[3] ASEAN, Vientiane Action Programme, November 2004.

[4] The relevance of perceptions regarding the "Self" or the "We", the "significant we" and the "Other" arises from recent studies of "identity" in the context of social identity theory (SIT). SIT has its origins in social-psychology and attempts to examine the "inevitability of conflict" along with the causal properties behind when two or more states will seek to cooperate. Trine Flockhart, "'Complex Socialisation': A Framework for the Study of State Socialization", *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 1 (2006), pp. 90–92; Peter Hays Gries, "Social Psychology and the Identity-Conflict Debate: Is a 'China Threat' Inevitable?" *European Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 2 (2005), pp. 256–257.

[5] Phillips W. Shively, *The Craft of Political Research* (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005) pp. 100–101.

[6] 92.1% of these respondents were from a "city of 20,000 people or more".

[7] Donald K. Emmerson, "Security, Community, and Democracy in Southeast Asia: Analysing ASEAN", *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 6, no. 2 (2005): p. 177.

[8] Christopher Roberts, "ASEAN Charter: The Model Decision", *The Straits Times*, 9 September 2005.

[9] Interview with senior official in the ASEAN Secretariat, Jakarta, April 2006.

[10] Hiro Katsumata, *Why ASEAN Criticised Myanmar*, Asia Times, 2003, available at <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/EF25Ae02.html>(accessed 10 October 2005).

[11] Interview with M. C. Abad Jr., ARF Unit Director, ASEAN Secretariat, Jakarta, 20 April 2006.

[12] Interview with Luan Thuy Dong, Director, Southeast Asian Studies Center (IIR), Hanoi, 7 July 2005.