

Traditional Challenges to States: Intra-ASEAN Conflicts and ASEAN's Relations with External Powers

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ASEAN was established in 1967 as a loose regional organization, on the basis of a declaration—the Bangkok Declaration—rather than of a treaty. Due to fundamental changes in international relations in the past few years, the ASEAN member states have decided to establish the ASEAN Charter, with the aim of developing their association into a community with a legal personality. At the Kuala Lumpur Summit in 2005, the member states agreed to enact the charter, so as to strengthen an institutional framework for solving problems and realizing its objectives, and to establish a firm foundation to facilitate and strengthen the process of community building.

These institutional projects are perhaps the most important ASEAN undertakings in the post-Asian financial and economic crisis era, underlining significant progress in the regionalization process in Southeast Asia. There certainly remain many questions regarding the nature of the community ASEAN is now developing, and the transformation of relations between its members, and between ASEAN and external powers. There is no doubt that ASEAN has been remarkably successful in managing inter-state relations and in providing modalities for the engagement of external powers in the region. It has proven to be effective in building confidence and in preventing conflicts among the member states. The association has also been the driving force in the process of broader security and economic multilateralism in the Asia Pacific, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three (APT) and the East Asia Summit.

It should be noted, however, that states' interactions are not static. New developments in international relations have put Southeast Asian countries in a corner: some have been able to make adjustments while others have been constrained. First,

domestic factors which surfaced due to the democratization process in the region have to be taken into account in the formulation of foreign policy. This has created some sensitivity in the member states' interactions in dealing with regional and bilateral issues, such as border security, environmental issues, illegal migrants and human trafficking. The second factor is the rise of regional powers and their activities in the Southeast Asian region. Traditional issues, such as border conflicts, territorial claims and power projection, will remain relevant. In addition, new issues, such as competition for energy resources, the safety of supply lines and maritime security, will arise and shape regional strategic configurations in the future.

Traditional Security: Intra-ASEAN Conflicts

ASEAN is frequently said to be the most successful regional organization in terms of the promotion of regional peace and stability. Politically speaking, it has developed a set of norms and values which shape the behaviour of its members towards the realization of the association's goals and objectives. No one believes that war will ever break out between ASEAN member states. The likelihood of an accidental or inadvertent war arising between putative adversaries is extremely low.¹

However, this does not tell the whole aspect of Southeast Asian security. There remain geopolitical disputes across the region. In particular, many maritime boundaries in the region are ill defined, and this has resulted in disputes over maritime territory and resources. As states are becoming increasingly dependent upon sea routes and natural resources for their economic survival, territories and borders have become sensitive issues in the region. The need to protect natural resources has become significant, and territorial issues have become an important national security agenda, in a region vulnerable to external interference.² Thus, in the new international environment, two elements of regional security are relevant: the importance of natural resources to international trade and competition over such resources. It should be noted that domestic sensitivity to territorial disputes has been very high in the past few years.

Perhaps the sensitivity of geopolitical issues pertains to the traditional notion of sovereignty, which has been strengthened by deep-seated historical animosity and the different perceptions of threats. This has been complicated further by the pervasive

involvement of external powers in the region. Lingering suspicions between sub-regional powers continue to persist. The relations between Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia are illustrative. Their relations have been undergoing ups and downs, characterized by dynamic domestic factors arising from the history of Southeast Asian politics. A similar pattern can be seen in the relations between the Burmese, the Thai, the Khmer and the Vietnamese. They have gone through cycles of greatness, decline and rivalry, all of which have influenced their security perceptions. Barry Buzan has rightly used the term “security complex” to describe this regional security in Southeast Asia.³

To a lesser extent, geopolitical issues also explain the logic behind the current trend of military modernization—if not a regional arms race. For Indonesia, the loss of Sipadan and Ligitan Islands to Malaysia and the dispute over the Ambalat waters have underlined the relevance of the defence of its islands and sea boundaries and the need to develop air and naval forces in the future. The perception that Singapore’s import of sand from Indonesia has enlarged the former’s territory and affected its border with Indonesia reflects geopolitical calculations. The notions of “maritime” and “mainland” Southeast Asia also underline the historical legacy of interstate relations which have shaped the perceptions of states. The most controversial issue may be the rumour that there has been a plan to build a tunnel across the Kra region of Thailand to connect the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Far from being economically feasible, it echoes intra-ASEAN relations on the basis of the classical realist conception of international relations.

Relations with External Powers

From its inception, one of the basic purposes of ASEAN has been to find modalities for its relations with external powers. ASEAN has never intended to exclude external powers from the region. The geo-strategic and geo-political positions of Southeast Asia have made it unthinkable to insulate the region from the interests of major powers. It should be noted, in this respect, that Southeast Asia had been central to the rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The Southeast Asian countries have always been making policy choices, by maintaining a balance between bilateralism and multilateralism, with some adjustments where necessary, and by preserving a significant degree of autonomy in their foreign policy. In 1976, ASEAN established the Treaty of

Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which stipulated a set of norms and values or a code of conduct in states' interactions. The TAC can be seen as the first political undertaking to build mutual confidence and trust and to prevent conflicts. Another set of norms—which is more practical than political in nature—is the Treaty on a Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ), which underlines ASEAN's global commitment to nuclear non-proliferation.

It is true that an economic crisis hit the region severely in the late 1990s, causing dramatic political and regime changes in some of the Southeast Asian countries. ASEAN, however, has recorded much progress in its economic recovery. In fact, the crisis has served as a catalyst for deeper economic integration. ASEAN has maintained its key role as the driving force for broader political and security cooperation. It has decided to move towards an ASEAN community, and has championed the APT as an integral part of the process of East Asia community building.

In addition, the development of international trade underlines the significance of sea routes for transportation services in Southeast Asia. This development is becoming greater, and international trade has become more dependent on ocean transport than ever before. The World Bank estimates that the volume of seaborne trade will increase from 21,480 billion tons in 1999 to 35,000 billion tons in 2010, and to 41,000 billion tons in 2014.⁴ Meanwhile, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), in its report entitled “Review of Maritime Transport 2004”, has recorded a constant increase in seaborne trade in the last 20 years. Asia takes up 37.2% of total seaborne trade in the world, thereby topping the list of regions which have high volumes of such trade, followed by Europe (25.1%), America (20.7%), Africa (8.9%) and other regions (8.1%).⁵

The activities of external powers are also affected by the significance of the sea lanes in Southeast Asia. To begin with, China has become dependent on the Straits of Malacca, Sunda, Lombok and Ombai Wetar, and the northern area just before reaching the South China Sea. These lanes are used by 50,000–60,000 ships every year, carrying 25% of the total world trade and 50% of world oil transportation. 50% of China's oil imports pass through these lanes, and this figure is expected to increase because China now has only 2.1% of the world's oil supply in its territory. More than 90% of China's oil

demands are imported and transported by sea. This figure is expected to increase because China will be importing 12.7 million barrels per year by 2020. At present, China imports 6.2 million barrels per day. This means that China will become more dependent on the sea lanes in Southeast Asia and, in particular, the area surrounding Indonesia. Hence, the tendency on the part of China to strengthen its military power projection will inevitably become greater.

China has made significant progress in terms of its relations with ASEAN. It has signed FTAs with ASEAN and with individual ASEAN countries. It has also launched a soft face of diplomacy. It has published a defence white paper in response to the criticism that there is no transparency in its military capabilities. Beijing signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2002, and exhibited its goodwill in the region by acceding to ASEAN's TAC in 2003. To a large extent, by taking these initiatives, China has successfully persuaded ASEAN countries that it does not pose an immediate security threat to them. However, it seems that Beijing has not been able to dispel completely the suspicions that China as a great power can dominate the region in the future.⁶ It is worth mentioning that Southeast Asia is important for China for various other reasons. This region is crucial in terms of the promotion of multi-polarity and the countering of the US. In addition, ASEAN is also a potential ally in resisting Western pressure in the areas of political liberalization and human rights.⁷ Finally, China's relations with ASEAN will make it difficult for Taiwan to strengthen its political ties with ASEAN.

A similar trend can be identified in the case of Indian diplomacy. India sees ASEAN as a potential strategic partner for the pursuit of its economic and security interests, and thus has taken some initiatives. It became a summit-level partner in 2002. It has also signed ASEAN's TAC, as well as the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity. India was included in the East Asia Summit in Kuala Lumpur in 2005.

Japan has also been demonstrating an assertive foreign policy. Many factors explain this trend. Historically, Southeast Asia is a bridge connecting the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, both of which are vital to Japan's sea lanes of communications. Most of the oil which Japan imports from the Middle East passes through Southeast

Asian waters.⁸ Southeast Asia will continue to remain economically attractive to Tokyo's economic interests. Being left out of the China-ASEAN FTA, Japan recently launched the Japan-ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Partnership. It has also been involved in peacekeeping operations in Southeast Asian countries, signifying an increase in its security role in the region. The country's defence agency has recently been upgraded to become the ministry of defence. Politically, Japan-ASEAN relations serve as a counterweight to China.

In light of these developments, the US remains an important actor in the region. Its military presence and bilateral alliances have been able to maintain the stability of the region. While it has been pessimistic about the prospect of community building in East Asia and has also lost interest in the ARF, the US has sought to revive Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) as the main institution to address security and economic issues in the Asia Pacific. Given that the role of the US is important and there is no one at the moment ready to replace it as a stability guarantor, the ASEAN members have to find a way of involving Washington in various regional initiatives and in an East Asian Community.⁹

Conclusion: Implications for ASEAN

The implications are clear for ASEAN. First, the association must consolidate its position by developing institutional capacities and mechanisms, in particular, effective decision-making processes and dispute-settlement mechanisms. These two are among the most important requirements for ASEAN in transforming itself from an association into a community. What is needed is an effort to maintain the relevance of ASEAN as an effective regional organization, capable of addressing practical issues arising from state interactions in the region. In an institutionalist sense, this is the main element of the proposed ASEAN Charter. Second, consolidation will put ASEAN in a central position in the broader regionalization of the Asia-Pacific region. Offensive diplomacy on the part of China, Japan, India and the US can cause ASEAN to be adrift and divided, should the association fail to respond effectively and timely to recent regional developments. The challenges are thus real. Ultimately, Southeast Asia is an open geopolitical and strategic

landscape, in which both the ASEAN members and the external powers always have legitimate interests to pursue.

¹ Bernard Fook Weng Loo, “Transforming the Strategic Landscape of Southeast Asia”, *Contemporary of Southeast Asia* 27, no. 3 (2005), p. 391.

² Edy Prasetyono, “NTS Challenges and Policy Responses in Indonesia”, a paper presented at the Inaugural Meeting for the Consortium on Non-Traditional Security Studies in Asia (NTS-Asia), Singapore, 8–9 January 2007.

³ Barry Buzan, “The Southeast Asian Security Complex”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 10, no. 1 (June 1988), p. 4.

⁴ Cdr PK Ghosh, “Maritime Security Challenges in South Asia and the Indian Ocean: Response Strategies”, A paper presented for the Center for Strategic and International Studies-American-Pacific Sealanes Security Institute conference on Maritime Security in Asia, Honolulu, Hawaii, January 18–20, 2004.

⁵ See Keynote Address of YB Dato’ Sri Chan Kong Choy, Minister of Transport Malaysia at the 3rd Indian Ocean Research Group (IORG) Conference on Sealane Security in the Indian Ocean, Kuala Lumpur, 11 July 2005.

⁶ Denny Roy, “Southeast Asia and China: Balancing or Bandwagoning”, *Contemporary of Southeast Asia* 27, no. 2 (2005), p. 308.

⁷ Jie Chen, “Human Rights: ASEAN’s New Importance to China”, *The Pacific Review* 6, no. 3 (1993), pp. 227–237.

⁸ JCIE, *ASEAN-Japan Cooperation: A Foundation for East Asian Community* (JCIE: Tokyo, 2003), p. 157.

⁹ Jusuf Wanandi, “East Asia Regionalism and Global Governance”, *Indonesian Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2007), p. 114.