

US-ASEAN Relations in the Context of ASEAN's Institutional Development: Challenges and Prospects

K.S. Nathan

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During the Cold War era, the Southeast Asian regional grouping served as a critical front against international communism. The strategic goal of the United States in its relations with ASEAN was to build a regional block as a counterweight to the influence of the Soviet Union, Vietnam and China in the region. The United States supported ASEAN, with the aim of insulating its members from the threat of international communism stemming from Moscow and Beijing.

For its part, ASEAN needed US engagement and support to build an "anti-communist" grouping, to buy time to consolidate its political and economic foundations to ward off the communist threat, and to remain firmly in the American camp. In this respect, the US-ASEAN Dialogue mechanism was established in 1977. Within this framework, the two parties focused on issues such as economic development, the extension of US preferential trade arrangements to ASEAN members, and the promotion of direct investment from the United States to Southeast Asia. In sum, during the Cold War era, both sides were pursuing strategic goals on the basis of mutual interests and complementarity.

The relevance of ASEAN in terms of US strategic interests determined the kind of institutional framework and process of interaction between the two parties. US economic and military assistance to ASEAN was important in shoring up the "external façade" of ASEAN as a collective grouping possessing a singular personality. However, in reality, the "internal façade" indicated otherwise: Washington dealt with ASEAN members on an individual basis.

This chapter focuses on the development of US-ASEAN relations in recent years. Its central claims are threefold. First, ASEAN has advanced multilateralism in the political/security sphere of the Asia-Pacific region in the post-Cold War era. In particular, it established the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), involving the great powers such as the United States. By so doing, it has taken a liberal, or constructivist, approach to regional security, as opposed to a realist one.

Second, the United States has largely been sceptical of ASEAN. It has been sceptical of the ability of ASEAN to deliver concrete results, and thus places a greater emphasis on bilateralism vis-à-vis Southeast Asian countries. Although the United States does participate in the ARF, it has remained suspicious of the ability of the forum to contribute to regional security.

Third, the Southeast Asian countries have considered an ASEAN Charter, with the aim of strengthening US-ASEAN relations. These countries have attempted to strengthen the institutional framework of their association and to grant ASEAN a legal personality, thereby overcoming the institutional and legal obstacles to US-ASEAN relations. By so doing, they have sought a new form of bilateralism, in which the United States deals with ASEAN as a collective entity, while making a departure from the traditional version of bilateralism, which is founded on Washington's relations with individual ASEAN countries.

ASEAN's Institutionalism and Regional Empowerment

The 1998 Hanoi Plan of Action (HPA) underscores the trajectory of ASEAN's constructivism in the political/security sphere. The HPA outlines ASEAN's Vision 2020 in the security sphere, with emphasis on the principles of ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), and the pursuit of cooperative security via the ARF.¹ Indeed, ASEAN's pursuit of cooperative security within the framework of the ARF is indicative of how an initially purely realist approach to security can be gradually transformed to include liberal and constructivist conceptions. In this regard, Amitav Acharya observes that norm-building and norm-setting are equally important functions of ASEAN's institutional development.²

As Sekiguchi Suetoshi and Noda Makito claim, "the ASEAN Way has to some extent won over China and the United States, despite its defects and shortcomings".³ If we regard

the ASEAN Track 2 processes as an integral part of the “ASEAN Way” of institutional development, the ASEAN-ISIS, according to Desmond Ball, is at the core of networking and dialogues on security cooperation.⁴

In the post-Cold War era, the policies of the United States toward ASEAN have increasingly reflected the need to identify with the prevailing trends in Southeast Asian regionalism, i.e., the regional entity’s efforts to empower itself in light of the significant geopolitical shifts that are currently underway: a rising China and India, a consolidated European Union and so on. In the late 1970s and 1980s, in meetings of the US-ASEAN Dialogue, the two parties focused mainly on increasing ASEAN’s access to the US market, stabilizing commodity prices, encouraging US investment in Southeast Asia, and strengthening security cooperation in light of the communist threat. In contrast, since the end of the Cold War, Washington has been obliged to subscribe to ASEAN-oriented multilateral security via the ARF, to ensure that the United States remains the pre-eminent, if not the dominant, player in the Asia-Pacific region.

However, the United States still views the ARF as a supplementary or complementary framework to the US-Japan alliance. For Washington, the latter represents the centrepiece for the maintenance of security in the Asia-Pacific region. From a US perspective, as Ralph Cossa maintains, the ARF’s contribution to the regional security order remains constrained by two factors: Taiwan’s exclusion from the ARF, even in discussions involving the Taiwan Strait; and China’s preference to deal with conflicting claims in the South China Sea through separate talks with individual claimants in ASEAN.⁵ The United States continues to demonstrate less faith in the ARF than in its bilateral security mechanisms with Asian/ASEAN states, in which Washington is clearly the senior and dominant partner.

US unilateralism, especially under the Bush Administration, could well impede ASEAN’s institutionalization of multilateral security in Asia. In its second term, the Bush Administration might have somewhat tempered the original Bush Doctrine formulated in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001. However, despite a tinge of pragmatism, the main features of the Bush Doctrine remain the same: US leadership in the Global War on Terror and its willingness to undertake pre-emptive action against suspected terrorists and terrorist bases.

ASEAN Charter and US-ASEAN Relations

The major external powers, including the United States, have been closely watching the development of the institutionalization of ASEAN. While ASEAN has taken the view that the “process” itself reflects the “product” and vice versa, external powers such as the United States have been more inclined to measure ASEAN’s performance as a regional institution with a corporate personality in terms of honouring obligations. The United States has not been happy with the loose arrangements and informality characterized by the “ASEAN Way”, which leaves much room for ambiguity.

However, if progress toward an ASEAN Charter is reflective of the regional entity’s effort to transform words into action, the United States is likely to take ASEAN more seriously as a collective entity, capable of taking collective action and collective responsibility. The ASEAN Charter, if endorsed and implemented, will strengthen Washington’s willingness to formally appoint a US Ambassador to ASEAN. It will also encourage the United States to sign ASEAN legal agreements on a plethora of issues such as trade, commerce and investment, the environment, health, education, human rights, immigration, double taxation, and security and technological cooperation. This new “bilateralism”, in which the United States deals with ASEAN as a collective entity, will significantly transplant the traditional form of bilateralism, which is constituted by Washington’s relations with individual ASEAN countries.

Community building in ASEAN in the decade ahead will arguably involve a variety of elements. These include a stable balance of power within multilateral mechanisms which do not pose any major threat to Washington’s economic, political and security interests; the creation of a stable and secure environment, envisioned by the ASEAN Security Community (ASC); the progress of ASEAN cooperation to a higher level of economic integration in the context of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC); significant if not measurable improvement in ASEAN’s record on human rights and political liberties, and greater participation of civil society via the creation of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC); and the effective implementation of the ASEAN Charter with the aim of deterring or punishing renegade regimes which attempt to set the clock back in terms of ASEAN’s transformation into a full-fledged community by 2020.

Conclusion: Community Building and US-ASEAN Relations

The US-ASEAN dialogues, initially economic in nature, are steadily developing and addressing political and security issues. Regional institutions, such as the ARF and the US-ASEAN Dialogue, exert significant influence on the policy process of ASEAN's institutional development. External inputs from the United States—in terms of economic and military assistance, annual joint military exercises such as Cobra Gold, cooperation in improving governance in the security and public sectors, and the regularization of US-ASEAN summit meetings—may accelerate the pace of community building within ASEAN itself. After all, the United States and ASEAN are institutionalizing both the formal and informal processes governing the regional security architecture.

Yet, unless ASEAN produces concrete results in terms of formulating common positions backed by legal power and responsibility, the United States will continue to place more faith in bilateral mechanisms for political, security and economic cooperation, which have been developed over the past 40 years. The United States as a singular sovereign nation-state apparently has more confidence in dealing with individual sovereign states than with regional groupings such as ASEAN, which is still grappling with the notion of “pooled sovereignty”.

If we take the more optimistic view of the constructivists, ASEAN's institutional development and success should be measured over the long haul. It should not be measured by immediate results in terms of establishing a free trade area or a collective security organization. In other words, our focus should be more on “process regionalism” rather than “product regionalism”.⁶ The engagement of external powers in Southeast Asian affairs will undoubtedly inject new values and norms into ASEAN. The Southeast Asian countries may eventually be socialized by these values and norms. In this respect, the role of the United States remains important in the political, legal, ideological, economic and strategic dimensions of ASEAN's community building efforts and evolution as a corporate entity.

¹ See *ASEAN Into the Next Millennium: ASEAN Vision 2020—Hanoi Plan of Action* (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 1999), pp. 2–3.

² For details, see Amitav Acharya, “Regional Institutions and Asian Security Order: Norms, Power and Prospects for Peaceful Change”, in Muthiah Alagappa (ed.), *Asian Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 210–240.

³ Sekiguchi Suetoshi and Noda Makito (eds.), *Road to ASEAN-10: Japanese Perspectives on Economic Integration* (Tokyo and New York: Japan Center for International Exchange, 1999), p. 34.

⁴ Desmond Ball, “CSCAP: The Evolution of ‘Second Track’ Process in Regional security Cooperation”, in Desmond Ball, Richard L. Grant and Jusuf Wanandi (eds.), *Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 1993).

⁵ Ralph Cossa, “East Asian Community and the United States’ U.S. View—One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward”, in *Report of The Japan-U.S.-Asia Dialogue on An East Asian Community and the United States*, Tokyo: The Global Forum of Japan, 22 June 2006, p. 61.

⁶ See, for instance, Amitav Acharya, “Regional Institutions and Asian Security Order: Norms, Power, and Prospects for Peaceful Change”, in Muthiah Alagappa (ed.), *Asian Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 210–240.