A Sense of Community for Southeast Asia

Rodolfo C. Severino

This paper was originally prepared for the ASEAN 40th anniversary project, "Ideas and Institutions: Building an ASEAN Community?" jointly coordinated by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Singapore, in 2007.

As the ASEAN Charter is being drafted, 40 years after the Association of Southeast Asian Nations came into existence, the question is asked in knowing circles: Will the institutions created or strengthened by the Charter help in building an ASEAN community? This question is important because, without becoming a true community, ASEAN could not hope to achieve its three basic goals of regional peace and stability, regional economic integration, and regional cooperation on critical common problems. Indeed, neither the ASEAN Charter nor the ASEAN institutions would work effectively if the region were not animated by a sense of community. Thus, institutions and a sense of community ought to reinforce each other.

D. W. McMillan and D. M. Chavis, writing in the *Journal of Community Psychology* in 1986, define a sense of community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together".[1] It is fitting that psychologists have given this definition. For our purposes, a sense of community is, after all, a state of mind and a matter of emotion. Note that McMillan and Chavis talk about "feeling" and "faith".

Bali Concord II

In 2003, ASEAN articulated its own idea of what a community is. The second Declaration of ASEAN Concord, or Bali Concord II, issued by ASEAN's leaders in Bali in October of that year (the first was formulated in February 1976 at the first ASEAN Summit, also in Bali), laid down three components of the ASEAN Community that they intended to build—the ASEAN Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community.[2]

The ASEAN Security Community would promote peace and stability in the region and contribute to fostering them in the larger world. Bali Concord II reiterates ASEAN's commitment to the peaceful settlement of disputes and its intent to get others to share that commitment. It also stresses ASEAN's adherence to a comprehensive concept of security. Such a concept encompasses threats other than armed conflicts between states—threats such as environmental pollution, possible pandemics, international terrorism, drug trafficking and trans-national crime.

The ASEAN Economic Community would constitute an integrated regional economy, the achievement of which would be subject to "clear timelines". This would mean making ASEAN a "single market and production base". Its creation would be accelerated in 12 "priority sectors", an increase from the 11 originally set out. The ASEAN leaders agreed to establish institutions and processes intended to ensure compliance with measures agreed upon, including the enhancement of ASEAN's mechanism for settling disputes that arise from economic agreements. Economic integration is deemed to encourage investments and thus generate jobs, improve efficiency and productivity, and lower costs. The ASEAN Economic Community also calls for technical and developmental cooperation among the members, including cooperation in human resource development, capacity building, infrastructure and communications, and consultations on economic policies.

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community envisions cooperation in raising the living standards of "disadvantaged groups" and the rural population, and in dealing with problems arising from population growth, unemployment, environmental degradation and natural disasters. It would focus on cooperation in public health. At the same time, it calls for cooperation in the preservation and promotion of the region's cultural heritage and for the cultivation of public awareness of ASEAN.

Plans of action and lists of "specific measures" were appended to Bali Concord II. So were the recommendations of the High-Level Task Force on ASEAN Economic Integration, composed of senior economic officials.

In the following year, in November 2004, the ASEAN leaders adopted the Vientiane Action Programme 2004–2010.[3] This set forth a "theme" and a "strategic thrust" for each of the three communities. Lists of more detailed and more specific

measures were annexed to the document.

At their summit in Cebu, the Philippines, in January 2007, the ASEAN leaders issued a declaration expressing "ASEAN's strong commitment towards accelerating the establishment of an ASEAN Community by 2015" —advancing the target year from the original 2020. Obviously, building a regional community out of such an extremely diverse collection of countries as Southeast Asia will take time. The year 2015 is but eight years away. At the same time, circumstances invest the enterprise of regional community building with increasing urgency. Competitive forces are rising all around Southeast Asia. The region finds itself in a vexingly fluid security configuration. Problems that require regional cooperation are increasing in number and severity. The acceleration of ASEAN community building, therefore, seems justified and urgently so.

Achievements So Far

In this light, 40 years after ASEAN's founding, four years since Bali Concord II, and three years since the Vientiane Action Programme, it would be appropriate to ask: How far has ASEAN gone in being a community, as its leaders define it? In what ways has ASEAN fallen short? Can ASEAN ever be a true community, both as defined by its leaders and in the sense that McMillan and Chavis would have it understood—a feeling of belonging and the faith that the needs of the members will be met by being together?

In terms of the Security Community, it has often been noted that no two ASEAN members have ever come close to fighting each other. ASEAN countries' fidelity to their commitment to settle disputes only by peaceful means seems firm. Indonesia and Malaysia have submitted their dispute over Sipadan and Ligitan to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and have accepted its judgment. Malaysia and Singapore have similarly referred their conflicting claims over Pulau Batu Putih, or Pedra Branca in Portuguese, to the ICJ. They have agreed to have their dispute over Singapore's reclamation activities adjudicated by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, and seem to be abiding by its ruling. The High Council, provided for by the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, is there to recommend ways of settling disputes peacefully. It has never been used; however, its existence manifests ASEAN's commitment to the peaceful settlement of disputes. ASEAN has adopted, and its

members have generally complied with, agreed norms of behaviour in inter-state relations, as embodied mainly in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. ASEAN has succeeded in engaging the major powers in constructive ways through the Dialogue Partner system, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and other ASEAN-led venues for consultation and dialogue. The ASEAN Plus Three process, involving China, Japan and South Korea, provides a mechanism for close cooperation among the 13 countries of East Asia and an additional occasion for the three Northeast Asian countries to undertake their own consultations. ASEAN has a similar framework with India. The new East Asia Summit brings together the leaders of the ASEAN countries, Australia, China, India, Japan, Korea and New Zealand for top-level discussions on great strategic issues and directions for cooperation on overarching problems—including the threat of an avian influenza pandemic and energy security. These are major contributions to peace and stability, both in Southeast Asia and in the larger area of East Asia and the Pacific.

In terms of regional economic integration, almost all intra-ASEAN trade is now, at least on paper, free of duty—if only traders made more use of the tariff preferences that the ASEAN Free Trade Area accords. ASEAN has also reached agreement *in principle* on a number of other measures for integrating the regional economy, such as measures concerning non-tariff barriers, customs, product standards and conformity assessment, transport and services. Some progress has been made in the negotiations on their implementation. ASEAN is also conducting negotiations on economic agreements with several dialogue partners, the most advanced being those with China, Australia and New Zealand, Korea and India. Some components of such agreements, which have political as well as economic significance, have been concluded. Together with China, Japan and Korea, financial cooperation, with ASEAN at its core, has made significant headway. Because of these, ASEAN is looked upon as a region that is at least aspiring to integrate its economy.

With respect to the cooperation envisioned in the Socio-Cultural Community, ASEAN has been credited with effectively working together to stem the SARS crisis of 2003. There has been some ASEAN cooperation in protecting the regional environment, as there has been in countering international terrorism, dealing with the problem of illicit drugs, and combating trans-national crime. A sense of regional affinity has developed

among government officials, businesses, and professional and social groups that organize on a regional basis. Several programmes bring ASEAN youth together periodically. In this light, a measure of regional identity is emerging in Southeast Asia.

Tasks to be Handled

However, ASEAN has a long way to go in achieving the goals that its leaders have set. It is still a long way from becoming a real community. ASEAN may have norms of conduct in the relations between states, and its members may have largely abided by them; but, unlike some other regional associations, it has not adopted common standards for the treatment of citizens by their respective states. In this sense, ASEAN is still a group without standards. ASEAN has seldom espoused common positions on great international or regional issues. It has not exerted effective intellectual leadership in the regional security forums that it has organized.

The regional economy is far from being effectively integrated. Although the ASEAN Free Trade Area agreement of 1992 directs their elimination, non-tariff barriers to intra-ASEAN trade remain largely in place. Reforms of customs procedures and practices, required for the proper implementation of ASEAN trade agreements, have been uneven. The harmonization of product standards, necessary for an integrated market, is extremely slow. So is the conclusion of mutual recognition arrangements that would do away with multiple tests of traded products. Negotiations on the liberalization of trade in services, although mandated by the 1995 "framework agreement", seem to be marking time. Transportation between or through ASEAN countries remains cumbersome and expensive, and the development of infrastructure is highly uneven. Communications within ASEAN are still fragmented.

An ASEAN agreement on trans-boundary haze pollution has come into force, and some progress has been made in terms of mechanisms and local-community consciousness. However, the haze problem still recurs every year. The effectiveness of an ASEAN response to an avian influenza pandemic is uncertain. Programmes to familiarize the people of ASEAN with one another's cultures are dependent on external funding and are, therefore, inadequate. Little is being done in informing the public or educating children in the region about ASEAN, although these are essential for community

building.

Institutionally, the authority of the ASEAN Secretariat is limited, although its authority was greatly expanded and elevated in 1992. ASEAN member states remain reluctant to provide the association with sufficient resources for enlarged functions. There are few effective mechanisms for ensuring compliance with ASEAN agreements or for settling disputes arising from these agreements.

The ASEAN Charter could help. It could do so by codifying ASEAN's norms and values. It would strengthen ASEAN's institutions and make its processes more effective. It could expand the authority of the Secretariat, its ability to do independent research, and its capacity to take initiatives on the association's behalf. It could improve compliance with ASEAN agreements. It could make ASEAN's dispute-settlement mechanism more independent and more credible. Not least, it could prod ASEAN's top leaders to assume active, hands-on management of the association's affairs.[4]

Conclusions

What is more important than overhauling institutions and promulgating rules is the development of a sense of community in McMillan and Chavis's meaning—the feeling of belonging, the conviction that members matter to one another and to the group, and the faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together. This would mean the identification of the interests and welfare of the region with those of the nation, the regime and the leader himself or herself. To invoke a cliché, it would entail a change in the mindset of most ASEAN leaders, officials, business people, educators, journalists, other opinion-makers and publics.

In any case, there is a cycle involved here—either vicious or virtuous. On the one hand, without a charter of the sweep and scope recommended by the Eminent Persons Group on the ASEAN Charter, it would be difficult to develop a sense of community in Southeast Asia.[5] Yet, without a sense of community, the charter would probably not be complied with, and it would not be effective to any significant extent. On the other hand, a sense of community could promote compliance with the charter, which in turn could help build a sense of regional community.

There are two things that are certain and clear. First, building a sense of

community takes time, especially in a region as diverse as Southeast Asia and with a legacy of mutual suspicion and even antipathy. Second, the rest of the world is not standing still and will not wait for ASEAN to develop a sense of community. To resolve this dilemma and to ensure that the cycle becomes virtuous, ASEAN may need two or more leaders. What strong leadership can do is to push the region's abiding purposes, and to overcome and transcend the lingering suspicions and animosities that continue to divide the region. In other words, two or more leaders may drive the rapid development of a sense of community in Southeast Asia.

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[1] D. W. McMillan and D. M. Chavis, "Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory", *Journal of Community Psychology* 14, no. 1 (1986), pp. 6–23.

[2] ASEAN, Declaration of ASEAN Concord II, Bali, 7 October 2003.

[3] ASEAN, *Vientiane Action Programme (VAP), 2004–2010* (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2004), pp. 1–53, available at <http://www.aseansec.org/15159.htm>(accessed 31 July 2007).

[4] Rodolfo C. Severino, *Framing the ASEAN Charter: an ISEAS Perspective* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005).

[5] See *Report of the Eminent Persons Group on the ASEAN Charter* (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, December 2006), available at <http://www.aseansec.org/19247.pdf>(accessed 31 July 2007).