

ASEAN: A Complex Phenomenon in a Complex Region

January 2014

Obaid Ul-Hassan¹

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has, since its inception in 1967, experienced great economic success through regional integration, and is perceived to be a prized catch both economically and politically. Yet ASEAN is far from reaching its potential. Many observers do not consider the organisation capable of handling its economic or security challenges due to a lack of unity and fragmented political leadership. As a result, the region of more than half a billion people is heavily influenced by Chinese and American power politics.

As Asian leaders gathered in October for the 23rd ASEAN Summit in Brunei to review the progress towards the establishment of an ASEAN Community in 2015, the summit was, however, dominated by the contentious territorial disputes in the South China Sea. While trade was high on the agenda, the summit was more of an attempt to overcome the deep divisions within the association over how to handle Chinese influence in the disputed territories. Yet it remains to be seen whether the ten member association can gain from its unprecedented economic growth to address and solve its most pressing security issues.

EU-Asia at a Glance is a publication series about the current state of affairs in Asia and EU-Asia relations

This paper expresses the view of the author and not the European Institute for Asian Studies

¹ Obaid Ul-Hassan is a Junior Researcher at the European Institute for Asian Studies



Introduction

Due to the rapid development of the dynamic Asian economies – driven largely by exports to the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) – greater collaboration with the rest of the world while mitigating regional issues, particularly security-related ones, has become an increasingly pressing issue. Yet, as closer cooperation between the world's largest economies has become indispensable in a globalised world, a high level of economic integration within Asia has not provided the impetus for regional institutionalisation, resulting in low levels of Asian political integration. Despite calls from various Asian leaders for further cooperation between Asian nations, the strategic outlook of Asia remains fluid and uncertain due to its history of rivalry and conflict, which is still not entirely resolved to this day. Centuries-old inter-group conflicts, colonisation, the several conflicts erupting from World War II and the subsequent decolonisation process are but some of the issues which contribute to the difficulties encountered in Asian regional integration.

The decision to unite Singapore and the Borneo territories of Brunei, Sabah and Sarawak with the federation of Malaysia triggered a series of regional conflicts. Consequently, the Philippines cut diplomatic ties with Malaysia, rebels in Brunei launched an armed revolt and Indonesia launched a small-scale war against Malaysia. Thailand, for its part, was embroiled in volatile conflicts with Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Malaysia, while Myanmar and Vietnam were born in the midst of civil wars. The Cold War was yet another severe blow to the peace and security in the region as it fell prey to bipolar Cold War dynamics. The Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) was but one of many projects intended to “contain” the expansion of communism, and as a result, regional problems were not addressed at their root, and were subject to heavy external influences.

Asia's multiple faces

The notion of Asian regionalism has been used and addressed very differently. Similarly, the Asian idea is a multifaceted concept, characterised by economic growth, interdependence, hard and soft power as well as civilisational linkages and patriotism. In his article, *Asia Is Not One*, Amitav Acharya depicts at least four conceptions of Asia in the early post-World War II period. First, *Imperialist Asia*, typically affiliated to hegemonic purposes of the West's quest for power and influence, dividing Asia into different spheres of influence. Yet, it was due to the heavy influence of an Asian power, Japan, that the notion gained ground. *Imperialist Asia* reflected the unprecedented prominence of imperial Japan, which marked its dominance by invoking a discourse of pan-Asianism. The high degree of trade interdependence and military dominance had a serious impact on other Asian states and their civilian populations. Second, *Universalist Asia* aimed at exploring the concept of Asian regionalism through the idea of societies rather than narrow state-centric nationalism, including cultural, ideational and societal flows and not limited to financial and political purposes. Third, *Nationalist Asia* underpinned the virtues of nationalism and its struggle against Western colonialism, and as a result, Asian regional integration became an instrument for fighting colonisation in order to gain national liberation – the quest for Indian, Burmese and Indonesian independence emanated from the idea of an Asian federation. Fourth, originating from



the same platform as *Nationalist Asia*, *Regionalist Asia* went a step beyond the national liberation of colonial rule in order to pursue a collective voice on the international scene – it was a window of opportunity to restore historical linkages among Asian societies.²

To date, there is still no coherent understanding of the Asian region. The most striking characteristic of the Asian continent is its sheer size, and diversity in geographic, religious, linguistic, ethnic and political matters. Hence, the idea or concept of an Asian identity is rather tentative with little, if any, resemblance to the European Union.

ASEAN and its regional integration challenges

With the setting of such a controversial stage, a new line of diplomacy was required to facilitate communication among the Southeast Asian leaders in order to prevent future animosity and conflict. Thus, the creation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 was not so much an indication of regional solidarity, as it was a mechanism to prevent further rivalries in a somewhat conflict-prone zone.³ Despite the premature criticism it faced for being part of a series of failed organisations in Southeast Asia, it revealed surprising progress in overcoming these barriers, while profiting from regional cooperation. As a result of the accelerated integration and cooperation process, ASEAN recovered successfully from the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, and played an important role in helping the individual states recover. The original five states who signed the 1967 Bangkok Declaration – Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand – were eventually enlarged to include five additional states – Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. The ASEAN members have endorsed the vision of an ASEAN community resting on three pillars: an economic community, a security community and a socio-cultural community. Furthermore, in 1997, ASEAN leaders adopted the 2020 vision, outlining a peaceful and stable Southeast Asia, where each nation is at peace with itself, while eliminating the causes of conflict through the promotion of justice, the rule of law and regional resilience.⁴

However, despite ASEAN's regional integration developments, the association remains subject to severe criticism. Its informal decision-making, weak institutional capacity and security implications, as well as its inability to solve internal dispute settlements have all served to undermine its credibility as an international actor. Moreover, it is lacking true momentum without engaging the + 3 countries – South Korea, Japan and China. In finding a balance between China's dominance and its disinterest, the latter poses a key challenge. These are just some of the complexities and drawbacks encountered in ASEAN.

Due to the informal decision-making processes, ASEAN often adopts a consensual style of decision-making based on friendship rather than power, stability rather than adventurism. This process involves discreet discussions behind the scenes to work out a general consensus, which then acts as the starting point for the unanimous decisions in more formal settings. The idea of "regional resilience" is often employed, referring to the country with the most vested interests, the one that has the greatest say in any

² Acharya, A. (2010) *Asia Is Not One*, *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 69, No. 4, pp. 1002-1008

³ The Singapore Institute of International Affairs (2007) *Regional Integration, Trade and Conflict in Southeast Asia*. Manitoba: International Institute for Sustainable Development, p. 11

⁴ ASEAN VISION 2020, adopted 15 December 1997, Retrieved from <http://www.asean.org/news/item/asean-vision-2020>

particular conflict. The five founders of ASEAN advocate the idea of being able to freely discuss fellow members' domestic policies, particularly the remaining members, also known as the CLMV countries – Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. As ASEAN is strongly committed to regional integration with a particular emphasis on narrowing the development gap between the member countries, the CLMV members are compelled to accept integration initiatives proposed by the founding member states. Yet these smaller and weaker member states are not interested in deeper or wider integration due to their vastly different political systems. Cambodia's corrupt and repressive government, Myanmar's poor human rights record, and the communist parties' control in Laos and Vietnam are some of the internal challenges they face, resulting in ASEAN's weak standing and lack of unity.⁵

As a consequence of its consensus-based decision-making, also known as the ASEAN way, ASEAN is losing competitiveness in the new global environment, such as coping with the rapid pace of economic change. Its weak enforcement and implementation, and lack of monitoring has led to a weak secretariat, where world leaders do not know who speaks for the region. As the founding members had little experience sharing political power with supranational institutions, limited power was distributed to the secretariat. Consequently, ASEAN members are left to rely on their own governments' policies, amid the secretariat's inability to dictate policies.⁶ Aware of some of the obstacles inherent to the practice of consensus decision-making, the Eminent Persons' Group (EPG), which acquired the mandate to develop a set of reforms by the ASEAN leaders, proposed that decision-making should be based upon majority vote and not consensus. The proposal was discarded.

Along similar lines, ASEAN's consensual approach to decision-making creates an impediment for ASEAN's dispute settlement mechanisms. ASEAN was created neither to integrate member states' economies nor to build a supranational institution, but rather to deal with security-related issues. Its core principles of security cooperation were outlined in a morally rather than legally binding Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in 1976, which involves the following principles: mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity of all nations; the right of every state to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion; non-interference in the internal affairs of one another; settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful means; renunciation of the threat or use of force; and effective cooperation among themselves.⁷

Hence, regional disputes should be solved by complying with the principles of non-interference. ASEAN members are therefore expected to refrain from criticising the actions of member states' governments towards its own people, including in the realm of human rights. Although the idea of non-interference in member states' domestic policies, while respecting their national sovereignty, was intended to stabilise the association as a whole, ASEAN has been subject to severe criticism as it does not suit the demands of a post-Westphalian world order, where disputes and conflicts are multiple, complex, and volatile. ASEAN has nonetheless continued emphasising non-interference, while

⁵ Frost, E. (2008) *Asia's New Regionalism*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, p. 135

⁶ The Brunei Times (2012, March 31) *ASEAN Secretariat needs to play more effective role*. Retrieved from <http://www.bt.com.bn/news-national/2012/03/31/asean-secretariat-needs-play-more-effective-role>

⁷ Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, adopted on 24 February 1976, Retrieved from <http://www.asean.org/news/item/treaty-of-amity-and-cooperation-in-southeast-asia-indonesia-24-february-1976-3>



preferring to settle disputes by informal principles, such as the virtue of self-restraint and third party mediation. As a result of these contentious issues, the organisation has been unable to solve some of the most pressing issues among its own members, let alone those involving external states.

One important example is the Thai-Cambodian border dispute, which has resulted in dozens of casualties and displaced thousands, challenging ASEAN to turn its rhetoric on peace and security into action. From July 2008 until February 2011, when fierce fighting broke out, there were numerous opportunities for ASEAN to intervene. However, it refrained from taking action, because its members were reluctant to get involved in "internal affairs". Even a bilateral agreement was unlikely to settle the dispute, as Singapore, chairing the organisation in 2008, was reluctant – if not unable – to lead, and when the chairmanship was subsequently passed to Thailand, the organisation went mute while resisting the internationalisation of the dispute. A chance to prevent deadly violence was thus lost. Despite tireless and unprecedented Indonesian peacemaking efforts in mediating, monitoring and solving the dispute, ASEAN has been criticised for traditionally de-emphasising border conflicts as minor incidents, which is why its rhetoric only appears to apply to others but not itself. As this ongoing process of promoting the core principles of non-interference, particularly from external actors with the purpose of promoting peace and security, ASEAN is actually thwarting peace and security efforts among its own members. Consequently, it is not surprising that Hanoi is pushing for closer ties to Washington, Singapore is expanding its facilities to host US naval ships and Manila explicitly acknowledges the US as a strategic ally.⁸

Another pressing issue regarding ASEAN's integration is the number of partners the association engages with. ASEAN is one among many proliferated organisation in the region of Asia, which is why one cannot speak about ASEAN without referring to other major players in the region such as China, Japan and South Korea (jointly known as the ASEAN + 3), India, Australia and New Zealand. The structure of Asian integration can be referred to as a set of interconnected platforms, ASEAN representing the fundamental platform, ASEAN + 3 representing the next layer, followed by while Australia, India and New Zealand, countries that take part in the East Asian Summit. Furthermore, ASEAN relies on dialogue processes with non-ASEAN partners. This structure is not only confusing, but it has broader implications. For instance, as regular meetings are held through the ASEAN + 3 to strengthen security cooperation, the bi-annual Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), which includes all ASEAN countries, is another forum where security issues are also addressed. Though both organisations have many members in common, while presenting a new channel of cooperation, they do not share the same values, and more importantly, they face different sorts of threats and challenges. In addition, the level of light cooperation between different partners across religious, cultural, political as well as financial and security issues leaves Asian regionalism fragile due to the absence of leadership in ASEAN and the various, sometimes overlapping, regional and sub-regional organisations in Asia. Consequently, Asian cooperation is not safeguarded from regional disputes.⁹

⁸ International Crisis Group (2011). Waging Peace: ASEAN and the Thai-Cambodian Border Conflict. *Asia Report No. 215*, pp. 14-15

⁹ Capannelli, G. & Tan, S.S. (2012). Institutions for Asian Integration: Innovation and Reform, *ADB Working Paper Series No. 375*, pp. 4-7



In the aftermath of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, a new concept of Asia, *Exceptionalist Asia*, gained ground, in the context of China's rise. Acharya argues that the Asia we will witness in the coming decades will be shaped by contestations and compromises between *Universalist Asia* and *Exceptionalist Asia*. As closer cooperation between economies in a globalised world facilitates greater development, the exceptionalists will opt for an integrated region, while the universalists will be embedded in universal values such as human rights, democracy and environmental protection.¹⁰ In this process, neither traditional balance of power nor collective security perspectives will establish a foothold in Asia's regional architecture. As a result, small states will continue seeking closer ties with India and China instead of uniting against them, while maintaining and strengthening their ties with the US to prevent Indian and Chinese dominance. This policy of bandwagoning versus hedging sheds light on ASEAN's complex partnerships, not to mention Asia's regional integration challenges. The prospects for a prosperous ASEAN – and many other organisations in the region – hinge upon mastering the art of balancing between Chinese dominance and its disinterest, outlined by three elements: first, the engagement of China at the financial, political and strategic level; second, the persuasion of other major powers, particularly the US in order to act as a counterweight to Chinese regional influence; and third, the inclusion of other regional great powers with the purpose of demonstrating their stake in establishing and maintaining a stable regional order.

However, the repercussions of such measures lead to a great deal of mistrust between ASEAN members, particularly on security-related issues. As hesitation on combat-related joint military exercises and collective security initiatives continue, member states prefer bilateral exercises with the US.¹¹ Moreover, the Asian Regional Forum (ARF) – an organisation of ten countries with the purpose of maintaining peace, security and cooperation in the region – cannot provide legitimacy regarding the use of force, joint education and training and procedures for command and control due to its large and diverse body of members, and its style of consensus decision-making and minimal institutionalisation.

ASEAN's future: will it follow the EU model?

As leaders from the ten-member association gathered in October 2013 for the 23rd ASEAN summit in Brunei, tensions remained high over contested territories in the South China Sea. China claims the resource-rich waters and its chains of islands, islets and reefs while Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam lay claim to some parts. China, for its part, claims that it is firmly committed to a peaceful rise and does not desire any armed conflict with other claimant countries over territorial disputes, but Beijing has, however, on several occasions reiterated that it is prepared for any contingency regarding its red lines.¹² Meanwhile, flourishing economic ties between ASEAN and China continue. In 2012 trade equaled USD 500 billion, and it was announced that China and ASEAN would aim to expand their free trade area and increase bilateral trade to USD 1

¹⁰ Acharya, *Asia Is Not One*, pp. 1008-1013

¹¹ Frost, *Asia's New Regionalism*, pp. 134-135

¹² Aljazeera (2013, October 9). *ASEAN summit gets under way in Brunei*. Retrieved from <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-pacific/2013/10/asean-summit-gets-under-way-brunei-20131094534761988.html>



trillion by 2020.¹³ China has also proposed the establishment of an Asian infrastructure investment bank with the purpose of increasing infrastructure projects in the region, while ASEAN is looking to transform itself by importing best practices from the EU, which is very telling for ASEAN's future prospects. The organisation is looking to facilitate and promote further cooperation with other organisations and institutions in the foreseeable future, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Gulf Cooperation Council, the UN and particularly the EU. Even though the EU's structure is different from that of ASEAN, the two have committed to deepen their cooperation on a variety of issues including politics, economics, security, health and education.

ASEAN Secretary General Le Luong Minh addressed the prospects for future EU-ASEAN cooperation in a speech in October at Val Duchesse in Brussels in which he reiterated the great importance of ASEAN's longstanding relationship with the EU. Trade and investment relations between ASEAN and the EU have continued to flourish in spite of the financial crisis and the Euro Crisis. While commending EU-ASEAN relations, he called for further commitment from both sides on a wide range of issues which included enhancing ASEAN-EU cooperation in multilateral fora such as the UN and ASEM; closer coordination on regional and international issues; the promotion of bilateral trade and investment; and the promotion of further people-to-people connectivity and interaction.¹⁴

Within a region increasingly influenced by China and the US, cooperation between the EU and ASEAN presents a promising channel of communication, where the EU, for its part, should support peace and security initiatives such as maritime security, disaster-relief, conflict prevention, crisis management, and peace-building. EU-ASEAN relations have typically been dominated by trade, which will surely remain the backbone of their cooperation. However, in a break with the EU's past practice of lecturing ASEAN states on human rights and its humanitarian mission to Indonesia, relations beyond trade and development aid have improved. As a result, the EU acceded to TAC in 2012, while sanctions were lifted against Myanmar last year. To date, the EU has been instrumental in ASEAN's integration process through the provision of funding from the European Commission and EU member states with the purpose of aiding ASEAN in its plans to achieve comprehensive regional economic integration in the form of the ASEAN Economic Community by 2015.¹⁵ The future success of EU-ASEAN relations depends on the extent to which the two regions will be able to address common interests, while recognising each other's cultural and social diversity.

As ASEAN is looking to transform itself by 2015 in the form of a single market following the EU example of freer flow of goods, services and investments, it remains to be seen whether ASEAN can gain from the EU's own experience. The European countries have, for the past six decades, refrained from the use of force against each other, while promoting peace, democracy and human rights, thereby transforming a continent of war to a continent of peace. As a result, the EU was awarded somewhat controversially Nobel Peace Prize in 2012 against the backdrop of economic crisis, rising (youth) unemployment rates, and the survival of its single currency. Though the EU represents a

¹³ The Global Times (2013, October 10). *China-ASEAN trade to bloom on new target*. Retrieved from <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/816935.shtml#.UpXzm-Lq9Y4>

¹⁴ Keynote address by H.E. Le Luong Minh, Secretary-General of ASEAN at the Conference on the "EU and ASEAN: Prospects for Future Cooperation". Retrieved from http://www.eu-asiacentre.eu/documents/uploads/news_96_eu-asean_conference_151013_le_luong_minh_draft_remarks.pdf

¹⁵ Overview of ASEAN-EU Dialogue Relations, Retrieved from <http://www.asean.org/news/item/overview-of-asean-eu-dialogue-relations>



uniquely successful peace project in world history, the union has received severe criticism for not being able to promote and implement its values outside the EU, partly due to cumbersome decision-making processes. ASEAN decision-making is not adequately suited for solving its internal problems, but this is no different from intra-EU debates on the future of the Union. Even with the latest attempt in 2009 to reform its governing institutions and decision-making processes through the Lisbon Treaty, with the purpose of improving the efficiency of an enlarged EU, the union remains torn on various issues including foreign and security policy. Despite forging common policies on the Balkans, the Middle East peace process, and more recently the considerable relief of sanctions against Iran, the EU remains subject to criticism. The organisation has, on several occasions, been characterised by deep divisions and lack of unity, such as during the US-led War in Iraq in 2003, and more recently the Syrian crisis.¹⁶

In light of these reasons, ASEAN ideally looks to the EU for ideas and best practices, but does not take the EU as a model to be followed or copied. ASEAN is more politically driven in comparison to the EU, and the EU experience on regional integration seems to indicate that the race for deepening economic ties and financial prosperity does not need to be unilinear or lead to a single end-state. ASEAN will not simply solve its longstanding disputes to become a stable region without stronger and more effective institutionalised agencies to cope with dispute settlements and decision-making on key issues. This, however, is not the most likely scenario if the status quo is preserved. The problem is that profound economic and socio-cultural integration can only facilitate cooperation on security-related issues, while ensuring a strong and integrated security cooperation also requires strong political will from the member states. Thus, if an asymmetrical balance between strong economic and socio-cultural cooperation and a weak cooperation on security-related issues prevails, the most likely outcome is not a peaceful and stable Southeast Asia.

¹⁶ Bickerton, C. J. (2012). Is EU foreign policy a success? Does it make sense to ask this question? *European Ideas*, Retrieved from <http://www.europeanideas.eu/pages/politics/foreign-affairs/is-eu-foreign-policy-a-success-does-it-make-sense-to-ask-this-question.php>



References

- Acharya, Amitav (2010) Asia Is Not One, *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 69, No. 4
- ASEAN VISION 2020, adopted 15 December 1997, Retrieved from <http://www.asean.org/news/item/asean-vision-2020>
- Aljazeera (2013, October 9). *ASEAN summit gets under way in Brunei*, Retrieved from <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-pacific/2013/10/asean-summit-gets-under-way-brunei-20131094534761988.html>
- Bickerton, Chris J. (2012) Is EU foreign policy a success? Does it make sense to ask this question?, *European Ideas*. Retrieved from <http://www.europeanideas.eu/pages/politics/foreign-affairs/is-eu-foreign-policy-a-success-does-it-make-sense-to-ask-this-question.php>
- Brunei Times (2012, March 31). *ASEAN Secretariat needs to play more effective role*. Retrieved from <http://www.bt.com.bn/news-national/2012/03/31/asean-secretariat-needs-play-more-effective-role>
- Capannelli, Giovanni & Tan, See Seng (2012). Institutions for Asian Integration: Innovation and Reform, *ADB Working Paper Series No. 375*
- EU-ASIA Centre, "EU and ASEAN: Prospects for Future Cooperation", 15 October 2013, Retrieved from http://www.eu-asiacentre.eu/documents/uploads/news_96_eu-asean_conference_151013_le_luong_minh_draft_remarks.pdf
- Frost, Ellen (2008) *Asia's New Regionalism*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers
- Global Times (2013, October 2013). *China-ASEAN trade to bloom on new target*. Retrieved from <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/816935.shtml#.UpXzm-Lq9Y4>
- International Crisis Group (2011). Waging Peace: ASEAN and the Thai-Cambodian Border Conflict, *Asia Report No. 215*
- Overview of ASEAN-EU Dialogue Relations, Retrieved from <http://www.asean.org/news/item/overview-of-asean-eu-dialogue-relations>
- Singapore Institute of International Affairs (2007). *Regional Integration, Trade and Conflict in Southeast Asia*. Manitoba: International Institute for Sustainable Development
- Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, adopted on 24 February 1976, Retrieved from <http://www.asean.org/news/item/treaty-of-amity-and-cooperation-in-southeast-asia-indonesia-24-february-1976-3>

