



The Challenges to Regional Security and Co-operation in the ASEAN Region

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ABSTRACT

This essay critically examines the multifaceted challenges confronting regional security and co-operation within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). As the geopolitical landscape evolves, ASEAN faces a myriad of issues that impede the realisation of its vision for a stable and collaborative regional environment. This study delves into the diverse factors contributing to these challenges, ranging from historical disputes and territorial conflicts to economic disparities and differing political ideologies.

Keywords: ASEAN; Challenges; Peace; Surmount; Regional Security

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has played a prominent role in establishing peace, security and stability in Southeast Asia. ASEAN has since grown from a 'primary manager' of intra-ASEAN conflicts such as the Cambodian-Vietnamese War in the 1980s to become a 'regional conductor' in engaging regional powers after the Cold War.¹ Indeed, the 'ASEAN Way' of conflict resolution via consultation and consensus, has enabled disputes to be resolved peacefully.² This is also why the former President of UN Security Council, Kishore Mahbubani, remarked that 'ASEAN has brought peace and prosperity to a troubled region' and even suggested the award of Nobel Peace Prize for ASEAN.³

However, ASEAN is not without its critics. Progress within ASEAN forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has often been described as 'slow' while the East Asia Summit (EAS) is seen, derisively, as nothing more than a 'talk-shop'.⁴ Moreover, the increased assertiveness of China and its use of the 'Divide-and-Rule' tactic has thrown ASEAN's unity into question—most notably, resulting in the failure to issue a joint communique on the South China Sea dispute in 2012, for the first time in ASEAN's 45-year history.⁵ In addition, with the ever-expanding scope of ASEAN in Non-Traditional Security (NTS) threats, coupled with a repressive autocratic rule in Myanmar, would the 'ASEAN Way' be able to handle the myriad of

discussions and address human rights issue in Myanmar 'without interference'?⁶

Certainly, there are challenges that ASEAN faces and this essay will discuss these challenges in the next two sections. The first section will identify the pertinent challenges that ASEAN faces in the areas of (1) Intra-ASEAN differences, (2) Strategic competition between global powers and (3) Non-Traditional Security (NTS) threats. In the second section, it argues that with the (1) Reinforcement of regional norms and compliance mechanisms, (2) Enhancement of its decision-making process and (3) Building of capacity for NTS, these challenges can possibly be surmounted. However, as pointed out by Luo, with the intensifying geo-strategic competition between the United States (US) and China, time is not on ASEAN's side as it grapples with the difficult task of maintaining ASEAN Centrality and its relevance in the region.⁷

SECTION I: CHALLENGES THAT ASEAN FACES

Intra-ASEAN Differences: Inter-state Disputes and Myanmar

Through the establishment of the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in 1971, the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in 1976, the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) in 1995 as well as the ASEAN Charter in 2008, ASEAN has contributed significantly to the peace and security in the region.⁸ While the founding



The signing of the ASEAN Declaration in Bangkok on 8th August, 1967, by five Foreign Ministers, marking the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

members of ASEAN were originally concerned with regime survival and communist influences, the establishment of these agreements have served to minimise conflicts and fostered mutual respect among member states, contributing to the stability in Southeast Asia today.⁹ Nonetheless, interstate disputes persists and together with the military coup as well as human rights issue in Myanmar, challenges to ASEAN exists even among member states itself.¹⁰

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The territorial disputes over the promontory of Preah Vihear temple between Thailand and Cambodia is one such example. In 1962, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled the temple to be within the territory of Cambodia and with the inclusion of Preah Vihear temple as an UNESCO World Heritage site in 2008, tensions between both states escalated which resulted in deadly clashes in 2011.¹¹ Sabah, is yet another potential flash point between the Philippines and Malaysia. Disputes over historical narratives could be used to justify violence as seen by the militant group Royal Sulu Army (RSA)'s gunfight with the Malaysian security forces which resulted in more than a dozen dead in 2013.¹² Such militarised skirmishes directly challenge the legitimacy of ASEAN as a security community and its ability to resolve disputes peacefully within the region.¹³

With the military (Tatmadaw) coup of Myanmar in 2021, ASEAN finds itself to be in a dilemma. On one hand, the 'ASEAN Way' calls for non-interference in affairs of members states while on the other hand, the ASEAN Charter includes 'respect for fundamental freedoms, the promotion and protection of human rights and the promotion of social justice'—which Myanmar military authorities failed to adhere to, by rejecting the results of the democratic elections of



A map of Cambodia and Thailand, showing the location of the temple.

2020.¹⁴ On the human rights front, Myanmar's continued persecution of Rohingyas and Muslims in the Rakhine state, has triggered strong responses from Muslim dominant member states such as Malaysia and Indonesia.¹⁵ Again, the 'ASEAN Way' of having consensus in decision-making, permitted Myanmar, the ASEAN Chairman in 2014, to put aside the Rohingya issue at the 24th ASEAN summit.¹⁶ Collectively, as pointed out by Weatherbee, Myanmar has become the 'cancer of ASEAN', by whom the credibility of ASEAN has been tarnished.¹⁷ As the only actor capable of addressing the crisis in Myanmar, the inability to de-escalate and diffuse the situation, not only calls into question ASEAN Centrality but can also mean an existential threat to its relevance as a security community in the region.¹⁸

Singapore and Malaysia, while comparatively benign, also had disputes that include water supply disagreements.¹⁹ As suggested by Lin, such disputes, arising from historical competitive forces, will likely persist and indeed, they have.²⁰ On a positive note, bilateral ties have improved as seen from the willingness to resolve the Pedra Branca dispute peacefully via a rules-based approach at ICJ while Malaysia has also changed its view of Singapore to become a 'symbiotic partner' in ASEAN.²¹ Such developments could augur well for ASEAN's ability to

overcome intra-ASEAN challenges through a shift towards rules-based management as well as co-operation and partnership through the ASEAN Political-Security Community.²²

Strategic Competition between Global Powers: ASEAN Centrality and Relevance

Besides intra-ASEAN challenges, global powers such as China and the US also exert influence and participate in a strategic competition within the region.²³ Economically, Southeast Asia relies on China as its largest trading partner while many ASEAN states such as the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia have significant security and military exchanges with the US.²⁴ As a result of these strategic competition between global powers, ASEAN may be forced to choose between the American or Chinese camps.²⁵ As these dynamics between US and China intensify, ASEAN's unity and thus its centrality, can wane in regional security.²⁶

The South China Sea (SCS) territorial disputes is an area where we see the influence of China being played out. In 2012, *BRP Gregorio del Pilar* of the Philippine Navy, sighted Chinese fishing vessels off the waters of Scarborough Shoal which resulted in a two-month standoff with Chinese Marine Surveillance (CMS) ships.²⁷ The Philippines brought the matter to the

Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), contesting China's claims on 'historic rights' over the island. While the PCA ruled in favour of the Philippines and dismissed Beijing's claims in 2016, China refused to recognise the ruling.²⁸ Through this episode, China successfully worked with Cambodia, in firstly, forgoing a joint communique at the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting as Summit Chair in 2012 and secondly, blocking an ASEAN statement to respect the PCA ruling in 2016. In a sense, the 'ASEAN Way' was used against ASEAN itself.²⁹ China's preference for bilateral dialogues and disapproval for multilateral forums concerning SCS issues, has undermined confidence in ASEAN as a security institution.³⁰ As pointed out by Caballero-Anthony, China's ability to cause division among ASEAN states has deeply affected the credibility of ASEAN Centrality.³¹

To counter China's increased assertiveness, ASEAN will also need to engage and socialise global powers, particularly the US, through forums such as ARF, EAS and ASEAN Defence Minister's Meetings Plus (ADMM-Plus). However, progress at ASEAN-led forums have often been seen as 'sluggish' and little more than a 'talk-shop'.³² In particular, the ARF has been criticised for focusing on processes rather than outcomes and not being able to implement preventive diplomacy—a goal it has set out to achieve since inception.³³ These have led to the US preference for minilateralism as seen in

the formation of the trilateral security partnership AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom & US) and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) as well as China's formation of the Lancang-Mekong Co-operation (LMC). These developments can reduce the relevance of ASEAN Centrality for regional security and strategic issues.³⁴ Even within existing ASEAN-led forums, China prefers ASEAN Plus Three (APT) given its greater voice in the forum while US and Japan have a preference for EAS. Hence, ASEAN would need to keep global powers engaged in Southeast Asia through ASEAN-led forums, while remaining as the 'driver', instead of the 'chauffeur'—where directions are set by the global powers.³⁵

Non-Traditional Security Threats: A Test of ASEAN's Capability and Capacity

According to Caballero-Anthony, NTS threats and the severity of its effects, means that security is no longer 'limited to the balance of power politics' and are increasingly, transnational in nature.³⁶ In the 2021 ASEAN Security Outlook (ASO), ASEAN members have identified COVID-19, a transboundary pandemic, as the key issue that has exacerbated Southeast Asia's vulnerability to existing NTS threats.³⁷ For instance, with more people working and studying from home, terrorist groups have utilised online communications to influence minds and increase recruitment online while terrorist



Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen (third from right) attending the ASEAN-China Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting.

attacks have continued with bombings in Jolo Philippines and Makassar Indonesia in 2020 and 2021 respectively.³⁸ Due to the increased connectivity during the pandemic, cyberattacks have increased exponentially as individuals and firms become targets for cybercriminals.³⁹ The issue of attribution thus emerges where ASEAN, having different levels of capability and national interests, may either lack the technological capacity or political will to credibly identify the perpetrators.⁴⁰ Climate change has also resulted in extreme weather patterns such as Cyclone Nargis and Typhoon Haiyan which have displaced over 6 million people and resulted in extensive economic losses.⁴¹ The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that damage costs due to climate change will reach \$2-4 billion annually by 2030.⁴²

Together with transnational crimes and maritime security issues, NTS has become expansive, complex and often seen as one of the most important insecurity for ASEAN members.⁴³ NTS will therefore test ASEAN's capability and capacity to effectively handle these multi-faceted challenges in the years ahead.⁴⁴

SECTION II: WHAT CAN ASEAN DO TO SURMOUNT THESE CHALLENGES

Reinforcement of Regional Norms and Compliance Mechanisms

The ASEAN Community (AC) comprising of the three pillars of ASEAN Economic Community, ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) and ASEAN Social-Cultural Community (ASCC) is the highest form of regional co-operation in Southeast Asia that has improved relations and instilled a habit of co-operation among member states.⁴⁵ In particular, the APSC 2025 blueprint outlines the characteristics of a rules-based community with strengthened institutional capacity to become a resilient community in a peaceful and stable region.⁴⁶ Hence, APSC has laid the foundation to deepen and broaden co-operation among member states, while instituting reforms in support of good governance, human rights, and fundamental freedoms.⁴⁷

Within ASEAN, the reinforcement of norms highlighted in the APSC blueprint expresses the desire of ASEAN member states to adhere to the rule of law and

resolve settlements peacefully—as demonstrated in the cases of Preah Vihear and Pedra Branca at ICJ.⁴⁸ This has reflected the willingness and growing confidence of ASEAN countries in rules-based approaches.⁴⁹ As suggested by Loh, countries generally comply with ASEAN norms as violations would appear undesirable.⁵⁰ Even when such violations occur, as in the case of Myanmar junta's refusal to fulfil the five-point consensus agreed upon previously, ASEAN was able to respond credibly by excluding Myanmar's top general, Min Aung Hlaing from the 2021 ASEAN Summits.⁵¹

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However, even with the transition towards a rules-based organisation through the establishment of the ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN community, these norms have yet to be translated into compliance mechanisms such as sanction provisions.⁵² This means that ASEAN does not have the mandate to intervene when a member does not comply with regional norms.⁵³ While there are compliance monitoring provisions by the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) and ASEAN Secretary-General, their roles remain unclear and more needs to be done to ensure compliance and effective implementation.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, as seen from ASEAN's deferment of Cambodia's membership following its violent coup in 1997 as well as the exclusion of Myanmar's Min Aung Hlaing from ASEAN Summits in 2021, punitive actions in ASEAN does exist against norm violations. Hence, the ability of ASEAN to protect norms that member states have subscribed to, will enhance its credibility and respect in the international community. Otherwise, if such norm violations are left unaddressed, there will be reputational costs and questions of legitimacy against ASEAN.⁵⁵

ASEAN would need to keep global powers engaged in Southeast Asia through ASEAN-led forums, while remaining as the 'driver', instead of the 'chauffeur' - where directions are set by the global powers.

Maintaining ASEAN's Relevance by Enhancing Decision-Making Process

Besides establishing itself to be a credible regional institution, ASEAN will also need to maintain its relevance to global and regional powers, particularly China and the US. This can be achieved by being the influential and neutral balance in Southeast Asia.⁵⁶ Since the 1990s, ASEAN has started to grow its influence by attracting global and regional powers to forums such as ARF, EAS, APT as well as ADMM-Plus so as to deepen their stake in the region's security and stability—a concept known as 'omni-enmeshment'.⁵⁷ However, with recent developments of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) led by the US, as well as the Regional Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) led by China, ASEAN members may be forced to take sides in the US-China rivalry, which may dislodge its neutrality and centrality.⁵⁸ In particular, the FOIP has led to the US engagement of Mekong countries via the US-Mekong Partnership (UMP) initiated in 2009. This was subsequently met by China's LMC in 2015 as a form of 'institutional balancing' against the US.⁵⁹ Minilateralism has since extended to security arrangements with the formation of AUKUS and Quad, where US is able to establish a 'hybrid' partnership that brings together more like-minded stakeholders (as compared to bilateral arrangements) but is more nimble than multilateral arrangements such as the ARF.⁶⁰

In the face of this growing competition as well as preference for minilateralisms between US and China, how can ASEAN continue to stay relevant in engaging the global powers? One way could be the enhancement of ASEAN's decision-making process. As argued by

Heydarian, the 'ASEAN Way' of decision-making, due to its consensus approach, is no longer sufficient under the influence of these global powers.⁶¹ Instead an 'ASEAN minilateralism' of like-minded states could be sought. Indeed, the ASEAN minus X (A-X) formula has already enabled economic liberations under the ASEAN Framework Agreement on Services (AFAS). As a start, the A-X approach could be extended to specific security challenges such as preventive diplomacy and counter-terrorism to enhance its ability to respond effectively under regional influences.⁶² Such an approach could be a means against China's 'Divide-and-Rule' tactic as seen during the failure to issue joint statements in 2012 and 2016. With the A-X approach, a joint statement could still proceed with dissension or abstention recorded.⁶³ As stated by Natalegawa, ASEAN continues to remain relevant for 'competing non-ASEAN powers to gather'.⁶⁴ Thus, addressing the dilemma of how ASEAN makes its decisions, will determine its centrality and relevance in the future.

Building Capacity of ASEAN for Non-Traditional Security Threats

Due to the transboundary nature of NTS threats such as pandemics, climate change, terrorism and cyberattacks, increasingly, ASEAN states find that NTS threats will not only challenge regional peace and security, but indeed the survival of states.⁶⁵ Hence, ASEAN has begun to build capacity to respond to these threats through mechanisms such as the ASEAN Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre) and the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) to address threats arising from natural disasters and climate change, ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism (ACCT) to deal with terrorism in the region as well as the ASEAN Cyber Capacity Programme (ACCP) to manage the regional cyberspace threats.

However, NTS threats has also called out the need for militaries to adapt to both terrorist threats and Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief (HADR)—both of which differs from conventional roles of militaries.⁶⁶ In addition, states have differing capabilities in persecuting cyber-related attacks. Hence, capacity building exercises such as the ADMM-Plus for maritime security, counterterrorism as well as cybersecurity table top exercises are a good start.⁶⁸ Still, more needs to be

done. As NTS threats evolve, ASEAN must also continue to adapt and co-operate collectively to resolve these similar, yet interdependent security threats.⁶⁹ However, ASEAN consists of many members with divergent objectives with regard to NTS threats. Hence, ASEAN's ability to develop a coherent approach for NTS will have implications for its resilience in the future.⁷⁰

CONCLUSION

Since its inception, ASEAN has been able to foster peace and security in a region that had been previously clouded by conflict and violence. Yet today, ASEAN has not only enhanced regional stability but also has a presence at the global stage—a feat that the founding signatories of the 1967 Bangkok Declaration will be amazed at.⁷¹ Nonetheless, challenges do belie this feat. This essay has identified three challenges that ASEAN will continue to face in the near future. The associated measures to surmount these challenges were subsequently discussed.

Firstly, intra-ASEAN tensions and disputes has and will continue to persist. While rules and mechanisms have been put in place for dispute resolution, its effectiveness will be determined by how ASEAN brings about compliance to these rules. Secondly, ASEAN is caught between a strategic competition between US and China. The 'Divide-and-Rule' tactic deployed will put the consensus approach of the 'ASEAN Way' to the test. Hence, ASEAN will need to improve its decision-making process and engage in minilateral collaborations, in order to remain relevant to these global powers. Thirdly, the transboundary nature of NTS threats continues to challenge regional stability and even the survival of states. The ability of ASEAN to have concerted responses to these multifaceted threats will have implications for its resilience into the future. In summary, it is surmised that ASEAN has taken steps to surmount these challenges, but it will be an uphill task to maintain ASEAN Centrality and relevance in the region.

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