

# CHALLENGES TO ASEAN'S REGIONAL SECURITY

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## ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author argues that the ASEAN region is beset by a range of regional security challenges and that co-operation in the ASEAN region is undermined by a number of factors. He begins by outlining the international security threats facing the ASEAN region and the transnational phenomena that can potentially destabilise the region. He then assesses how regional co-operation has been undermined by a lack of common identity and the complex and varied internal politics of ASEAN countries. He then examines the institution of ASEAN and contends that the mechanism of co-operation amongst ASEAN members is undermined by a range of factors. The author makes a holistic assessment of how successful ASEAN has been in fostering regional security and co-operation, in relation to its stated challenges. He concludes that despite its criticisms, ASEAN's overall success in preventing armed conflict in a highly volatile region is indeed commendable.

Keywords: *Co-operation, Peace, Threats, Dispute, Challenges*

## INTRODUCTION

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in 1967 with the aim of enhancing regional co-operation in order to promote economic growth, regional peace and stability.<sup>1</sup> While the aim of regional security was not overtly registered on the Association's agenda, it is difficult to imagine advancing regional co-operation and economic growth without the underpinnings of a conflict-free Southeast Asia. In 2003, the ASEAN Political-Social Community was established as one of three pillars of ASEAN—aimed at enabling that Southeast Asian states to 'live at peace with one another and with the world in a just, democratic and harmonious environment.'<sup>2</sup> Some 52 years after its inception, ASEAN's effectiveness in achieving its stated and implied aims—especially in the domain of security co-operation—is a widely polarising issue amongst critics and advocates of the Association.

This essay will argue that the ASEAN region is beset by a range of regional security challenges and that co-operation in the ASEAN region is undermined by a number of factors. It will begin by outlining the international security threats facing the ASEAN region and the transnational phenomena that can potentially destabilise the region. The essay will then assess how

regional co-operation is undermined by a lack of common identity and the complex and varied internal politics of ASEAN countries. It will then focus upon the institution of ASEAN, and argue that the mechanism of co-operation amongst ASEAN members is undermined by a range of factors. Finally, this essay will make a holistic assessment of how successful ASEAN has been in fostering regional security and co-operation, in relation to its stated challenges.

## SECURITY THREATS

An examination of ASEAN's external and internal threat environment provides us with insights on the extent to which these threats pose challenges to regional security and co-operation. Externally, ASEAN needs to contend with the economic and military rise of China, which has endowed the latter with reserves of hard power. This poses a security challenge for ASEAN countries, especially those with disputed territories with China.<sup>3</sup> Increasingly assertive Chinese actions around the disputed territories in the South China Sea—such as China's unilateral reclamation and military build-up of disputed islands, and her employment of state controlled fishing fleets for spying, ramming and other coercive actions—are indications that China is

increasingly relying on military means to resolve disputes with ASEAN countries, and appears to be prepared to continue on this trajectory in the future.<sup>4</sup>

According to Huong Le Thu, in his article, *China's Dual Strategy of Coercion and Inducement Towards ASEAN*, beyond military aggression, China has also sought to undermine ASEAN unity through employing a combination of coercion and inducement methods against individual ASEAN member states.<sup>5</sup> Methods employed include the offering (or withholding) of economic incentives, and they have succeeded in abusing ASEAN's consensus-based approach, effectively preventing ASEAN from playing an active role in resolving the South China Sea dispute.

Emmers suggests that ASEAN's and the ASEAN Regional Forum's (ARF's) co-operative security mechanisms feature a strong balance of power element.<sup>6</sup> ASEAN member states also run the risk of entanglement in great power rivalry, by becoming proxies for great powers vying for regional domination through flashpoints like the South China Sea.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the notion of ASEAN centrality—in which the grouping's interests (disparate as they may be) and collective voice are given due consideration in regional discourse—risks being derailed as major powers become more assertive in their regional approach.

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Internally, the ASEAN region is subject to transnational threats such as terrorism, drug trafficking, organised crime and internal human rights abuses potentially spilling across borders. Many of these threats were not present during the formation of ASEAN, but were later introduced by the onset of globalisation. One approach to overcoming the limitations in the capacity of state governments is to involve and engage other actors, such as non-governmental organisations, which are able to meaningfully contribute towards tackling these challenges.<sup>8</sup>

Overall, ASEAN faces both external and internal threats that it is ill-prepared to tackle. These challenges arise in part due to the institutional characteristics of ASEAN; these considerations will be discussed in depth in subsequent sections.

## THE LACK OF A COMMON IDENTITY

Beyond ASEAN's threat outlook, the fundamental nature of the ASEAN grouping also poses challenges to regional security and co-operation. Constructivists argue that beyond material capabilities and hard power interests binding regional players together, other factors—such as a shared identity, common norms and socialisation processes—necessarily define the successes and failures of a regional grouping.<sup>9</sup> In ASEAN's case, it has been argued that the lack of a common identity in Southeast Asia undermines efforts in regional security co-operation. A closer examination reveals that ASEAN member states are dissimilar across many dimensions—ethnicity, religion, language or political ideology. This wide range of different cultures and systems of governance, therefore, preclude the formation of a coherent and cohesive Southeast Asian identity.<sup>10</sup>

In the absence of compelling unifying factors, ASEAN's identity has been described as 'socially and politically constructed', and consequently, subject to influence by geopolitical and geo-economic shifts.<sup>11</sup> Should ASEAN member states opt to marginalise the Association in their foreign policy as a result of these influences, both ASEAN and its associated intuitions face the risk of unravelling and becoming irrelevant. The relative instability of Southeast Asian regimes also means that individual states are often not seen as possessing a consistent identity, which augments the wider failure of being unable to establish a coherent regional identity to bind ASEAN nations together.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, ASEAN's firm normative emphasis of national resilience also impedes the process of regional identity building. Instead, it leads to a collection of self-reliant states coming together under the auspices of ASEAN without developing a sense of common identity, ultimately undermining efforts at greater social transformation in Southeast Asia.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike the Western European and North American countries that are party to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), ASEAN member states also

lack a present-day common external threat to bind them together.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, the threat perceptions of many ASEAN member states are centred upon their fellow member states. In 1967, ASEAN was founded in spite of the founding members' animosity towards each other—Indonesia was engaged in Confrontation against Malaysia and Singapore, who had just separated. The Philippines claimed sovereignty of Sabah, which had just joined the Federation of Malaysia; and the tenuous allegiances of the populace along inter-mural borders strained Malaysia-Thailand and Indonesia-Philippines relations.<sup>15</sup> Today, inter-state fault lines persist, and are amplified by ASEAN's expansion into a ten-member grouping.

On the other hand, Kausikan argues that it is precisely due to member states' diversity that necessitates the existence of a regional grouping like ASEAN.<sup>16</sup> In this light, ASEAN's purpose was therefore one of 'managing diversity to prevent inevitable tensions from erupting into conflict'.<sup>17</sup> Singapore's founding Foreign Minister, S. Rajaratnam, has been quoted as saying to the founding members of ASEAN that 'if we do not hang together, we of the ASEAN nations will hang separately', implying that founding members would 'hang separately' as a result of their inter-state rivalries and tensions in the absence of a unifying organisation.<sup>18</sup> As a mechanism to prevent inter-mural conflict, ASEAN has a proven track record—as is discussed in depth in the penultimate section of this essay.

## INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES TO REGIONAL CO-OPERATION

An analysis of the institution characteristics of ASEAN also reveals further challenges to regional security and co-operation. Central to ASEAN's normative framework is the 'ASEAN way'—which refers to member states' approach towards the conduct of relations with each other. The three key tenets of the ASEAN way are: 1) non-interference in the domestic affairs of other member states, 2) a consensus-based style of decision-making, and 3) the non-use of force to settle disputes.<sup>19</sup> The ASEAN way undermines regional security and co-operation in several ways.<sup>20</sup>

Specifically, the principal of non-interference entails refusing to criticise the internal affairs of other ASEAN countries, denying support and sanctuary for

rebel groups seeking to overthrow the government of an ASEAN country, and providing political and material assistance to governments fighting against internal dissidents.<sup>21</sup> The non-interference principle ensures intra-mural cohesiveness and harmony, especially in a diverse organisation like ASEAN. However, this doctrine of non-interference is increasingly incapable of addressing the multitude of challenges that globalisation and interdependence pose for ASEAN members.<sup>22</sup> For instance, in relation to tackling international terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11, the emphasis on transnational co-operation apparent in Western Europe could not be matched by ASEAN due in large part to the principle of non-interference.<sup>23</sup> The question of how to deal with complex internal conflicts with cross-border implications within countries like Myanmar, where human rights abuses are being committed, has also affected this principle of non-interference.<sup>24</sup>

ASEAN members have debated whether a switch in policy to 'flexible engagement'—in which the principle of non-interference is lifted on issues that have cross-border implications—or the more nuanced principle of 'enhanced interaction', in which individual member states may comment on other states' policies with cross-border implications, but strictly outside the ambit of ASEAN, in order to be able to foster a more constructive approach to regional co-operation.<sup>25</sup> Notwithstanding these discussions, ASEAN's non-interference principle persists.

Like the principle of non-interference, the second tenet of consensus-based decision making has been hailed as a cornerstone for successful co-operation amidst diversity. However, it has also drawn its fair share of criticism. Other criticisms of this principle include the delay in prompt action resulting from the lengthy discussions required to gain consensus that precede a decision, as well as decisions that are invariably based around the lowest common denominator.<sup>26</sup>

Tan suggests that with the adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2008, the ASEAN way is gradually evolving to include rules-based elements, which is a departure from its regular approach that emphasises informality.<sup>27</sup> Such a development would eventually go some way towards addressing the criticism levied at the ASEAN way. In



*A commemorative stupa filled with the skulls of the victims at the Killing Field of Choeung Ek in Cambodia.*

dealing with heftier geopolitical rivals, a rules-based approach will also favour ASEAN as smaller states rely on rules to assert their rights.

Beyond the ASEAN way, it is also worthwhile to examine the efficacy and shortcomings of ASEAN-led institutions. Foremost among these is the ARF, the first of the ASEAN-led expanded frameworks, and a forum focused on regional political and security issues that consists of twenty-seven member states, including China, the US and Japan. The ARF was designed to promote confidence—building in relation to security issues amongst members. Security co-operation under the ARF was supposed to progress through three stages—confidence building, preventive diplomacy, and then elaboration of approaches to conflict. However, the ARF's progress has been hampered by intra-ASEAN hurdles, politics and functional challenges. One common grievance is that the ARF seems permanently stuck within its espoused first and second stages.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, the fact that the great powers within the ARF are led by the smaller ASEAN member states have

given rise to questions of whether ASEAN is exercising only nominal leadership.<sup>29</sup>

## The ASEAN Regional Forum was designed to promote confidence-building in relation to security issues amongst members.

Furthermore, the centre-piece of the ARF process is an annual ministerial meeting in which ASEAN foreign ministers meet with their counterparts in various configurations. However, the remit of these meetings is often vague and the broad formulations designed to offer foreign ministers greater flexibility often lead to a lack of focus and depth in terms of the discussions.<sup>30</sup> The broader question of how the ARF is supposed to marry a broad array of competing foreign policy and security objectives from countries such as China, Japan and the US without any explicit mechanism to stop conflict remains unaddressed.<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, the ARF has been criticised as failing in its objective of promoting preventative diplomacy, in particular due its emphasis on 'process over outcomes'.<sup>32</sup>

The establishment of the ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting (ADMM) in 2006, and thereafter the ADMM-Plus in 2010, represented an opportunity to rethink ASEAN's approach to regional security co-operation. The ADMM-Plus, while still in relative infancy, has demonstrated promise in fostering practical co-operation and collective capacity-building in response to non-traditional transnational threats.<sup>35</sup> While the ARF has been criticised for its unwillingness to get involved in the South China Sea dispute, the ADMM-Plus has managed to sidestep thorny issues such as the legality and validity of conflicting claims, and has succeeded in securing its participating states' commitment to adopt the Code of Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) in 2017.<sup>34</sup> This set of practical measures goes some way towards diffusing an otherwise tense situation at sea, preventing potential conflict escalation. The ADMM-Plus navies have since taken the implementation of CUES one step further by putting it into practice during the 2019 ADMM-Plus Maritime Security Exercise.

## ASEAN'S VALUE IN PROMOTING REGIONAL CO-OPERATION AND SECURITY — AN OBJECTIVE ASSESSMENT

Having analysed ASEAN's challenges to regional security and co-operation across various dimensions, the penultimate section of this essay will discuss ASEAN's overall effectiveness in enhancing regional security and co-operation. This section argues that despite the challenges faced, ASEAN has made significant progress in the areas of regional security and co-operation, and is poised to continue these contributions in the future.

Laksmana reminds us that the open discussion of security issues within the ambit of ASEAN was generally considered to be out-of-bounds for the first 40 years of the Association's existence.<sup>35</sup> This was especially so in the light of the levels of strategic mistrust between member states, with the notion of military conflict a not-too-distant reality. In this context, ASEAN's achievement of delivering 52 years free of armed conflicts between member states to the region—in a period where inter-state conflict has broken out in the Middle East, Northeast Asia, South Asia, and the Korean Peninsula—is not insignificant.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, while fora like the ARF have been accused of being mere 'talkshops', the role of dialogue as a tool to engage major powers should not be understated. In particular, ASEAN has been effective both as a means to socialise major powers in engaging the region, as well as fostering a conducive environment for great powers to engage each other.<sup>37</sup> 'ASEAN's strength can be found in its weakness'—as it lacks the wherewithal to threaten, great powers are therefore willing to engage and trust ASEAN.<sup>38</sup>

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Looking to the future of effective security co-operation in the ASEAN region, the outlook is mixed. The earlier sections of this essay have described the threats to ASEAN's continued relevance posed by the intensified geopolitical competition of great powers.



Minster of Defence, Dr Ng Eng Heng attending the ASEAN-China Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> December, 2020.



*Exercise participants receiving a brief on the progress of the exercise on RSS Stalwart during ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise in 2018.*

However, ASEAN, particularly through its defence sector institutions, continues to be a relevant vehicle for great power engagement through practical co-operation and capacity building. For instance, the inaugural ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise was conducted in 2018 amidst China's growing assertion in the South China Sea. In a similar vein, the first ASEAN-US Maritime Exercise was conducted in 2019.

## CONCLUSION

This essay has examined the challenges to regional security and co-operation faced by the ASEAN region. First, this essay has examined the range of security threats faced by ASEAN—which encompass a rising China, great power competition and transnational terrorism, crime and human rights abuses. Second, from a constructivist perspective, the wide variety of different regimes, cultures and systems of governance preclude the formation of a coherent regional identity, which undermines genuine co-operation.

Third, the essay delves into the institution of ASEAN, where norms of non-interference and consensus-based decision making are increasingly out of

step with a globalised and interdependent security environment. The organ of the ARF also evidences significant problems in relation to dealing with threats emanating from the relationships between great powers, while the ARF's lack of structure and teeth means that the ability of ASEAN countries to deal with international security threats is questionable. The essay has also discussed how the introduction of the ADMM and ADMM-Plus mechanisms have gone some way to overcome the ARF's shortcomings through the fostering of practical co-operation and collective capacity building in the defence sector.

Finally, the essay has analysed ASEAN's overall effectiveness in enhancing regional security and co-operation in relation to both its successes and challenges faced. It concludes that despite its criticisms, ASEAN's overall success in preventing armed conflict in a highly volatile region is worth recognising. The outlook for future regional co-operation in ASEAN is indeterminate—with increasing great power rivalry threatening to derail the Association, yet there are signs of continued progress in the areas of practical co-operation with major powers.

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