Why ASEAN Could Stay Strong?

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Abstract

How confident are ASEAN as a regional organization? Will ASEAN turn into a mere coffee-talk forum? This article evaluates the bases for ASEAN and demonstrates that ASEAN has reasons to stay strong as regional cooperation. Rather than denying tensions, this article agrees that there are tensions among members but it also recognizes such challenge as the one that unites ASEAN members together. There are some dilemmas among members of ASEAN that does not left much room for members but to cooperate with each other: the dilemma of risking higher tensions among members, the dilemma of risking the benefits of existing pooling of resources, the dilemma of improving connectivity among members and the dilemma of facing global pressure on good governance and liberal democracy.

Keywords: ASEAN, regionalism, dilemma, commitment, diplomacy

Introduction

How sustainable is ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) as a regional organization? The confidence in ASEAN used to be high, but the recent case of failure of ASEAN to issue a joint communique at the 45th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Phnom Penh had raised serious doubts on the centrality of ASEAN in the hearts of ASEAN members. At some levels, it brought concern externally too on how competent ASEAN is as an organization to handle disagreements on sensitive issues. No confidence means lesser confidence in working coherently as a regional cooperation, which means ASEAN could become mere groups of coffee-talk between members. Is ASEAN that close to jeopardy?

ASEAN may be like any other regional groupings; created based on agreements on members to uphold certain values and maintained because of certain common interests. Its dimensions of cooperation are also similar, socio-cultural engagement, economic cooperation, political and security building measures. But these are not the sole ties between ASEAN members.

This paper evaluates the bases for ASEAN to stay strong as regional cooperation. It argues that ASEAN is not built and maintained based on consensus and agreements alone but also on dilemmas and common challenges. The current developments in regional setting and global power shift have significance too in how members see and cooperate with each other. Of course, there is always a potential for severe unusual circumstance that would challenge ASEAN unity, but current unfolding of events do not suggest such path. All would be discussed in light of principles of diplomacy, current events and historical ties between country members.

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Reasons for Common Agreements

No man is an island and so is a nation-state. No nation-state can bear the reality of being alone, isolated, let alone encircled by external pressures that they have no influence to mitigate. Regionalism is one means to wither external pressures through agreements, trust and intensive cooperation among countries in certain territory.

Theoretically speaking, regionalism is a grouping of countries that share either common history, common values, or common goals or combination of all of these. The idea is to create common identity (such as those aimed by European countries through EU), enhance economic cooperation, or other kinds of cooperation. With that logic, the policies developed in regionalism tend to favour protectionism in favour of members' (socioeconomic) growth. However, in 1990s, there's the-so-called "new regionalism" where the idea is to create "open regionalism". The focus becomes heavy on economic cooperation, particularly trade. Countries seek trade deals, have no problem (or are actually happy about) welcoming more countries to join the grouping. As Grugel (2004) said, the new regionalism is a state-led project in the context of global transformation, part of state strategy to secure or holding onto markets and investment in the face of global transformation; and to adopt multilateral approach in handling issues considered important for the time.

In reality, ASEAN is different from the typical regionalism. On the one hand ASEAN indeed share common values and goals, but parts of their history (including among members and with outside countries) are divergent. When ASEAN was founded, the idea was less about establishing common identity and more about downsizing and preventing tensions among members.

The case of regionalism in ASEAN, particularly in the early years, should be seen in light of a search for new identity as countries used to be known as mere colonies of Western countries, who had successfully supported (and initiated) a massive and influential movement of the developing world to stand different from the Western-Eastern divide during the Cold War: the non-aligned movement. While ASEAN and Non-Aligned Movement are two separate things, there is the similar desire between members in the two groupings to assert firm position that are different from stands asserted by "big" powers. The two groupings enhanced each other's presence.

Established in Bangkok on 8 August 1967, ASEAN members began with just 5 countries: Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. Five foreign ministers agreed to sign the ASEAN Declaration: Foreign Minister Adam Malik of Indonesia, Narciso Ramos of the Philippines, Tun Abdul Razak of Malaysia, S. Rajaratnam of Singapore and Thanat Khoman of Thailand. The five agreed to build a tool and space to allow enhanced cooperation in the economic, social, cultural, technical, educational and other fields in the promotion of regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice, rule of law, and adherence of principles of the United Nations. Everyone agreed to bind countries in friendship, joint efforts and sacrifices for the sake of peace, freedom, prosperity in the region.

Touching upon the principle of "open regionalism", actually since the start, ASEAN already stated its openness for participation by all States in the Southeast Asian regions which subscribe to its aims, principles and purposes. Its goal was not to be exclusive but to be open in creating manageable relations in the region.

What made the five ASEAN leaders agreed on the terms of regional grouping is most impressive, especially considering the young-age of these countries, all (except Thailand) are former colonies and all are developing nations (with limited resources and experiences in sustaining economic growth). Instead of competing, they agree to join hands. This was ground-breaking in their own times.

Based on documents from ASEAN Secretariat, there were several issues that brought them together:

1. Repeated tensions between Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia. Thailand brokered the reconciliation between these countries.

2. Awareness that each country are pursuing own limited objectives and dissipating its meagre resources in the overlapping and often conflicting resources. This was raised by Philippines' Narciso Ramos.

3. Desire as "a region to stand on its own feet, strong enough to defend itself against any negative influence from outside region". This was raised by Indonesia's Adam Malik. On similar count, Tun Abdul Razak of Malaysia said that Southeast Asian countries need decisive and collective action to prevent the eruption of intra-regional conflicts and manipulation against one another. Rajaratnam of Singapore feared the risk of "balkanization" affecting Southeast Asia.

Unlike the case of European Union or Mercosur in Latin America, ASEAN despite its birth during the "old regionalism" concept, it was not aimed at protectionism per se, let alone narrowly-defined economic cooperation. In fact, since its birth, ASEAN already calls this an open grouping for any countries in Southeast Asia to join. The idea is to create strength that can withstand political whirlwind in global relations, while at the same time develop mechanism to tap resources in this region in wise way.

While ASEAN members agreed to defend themselves from external forces, it was not a political or military alliance. There was not even an idea of using this grouping as a tool to joint military forces in defending the region. In fact, despite the desire to be an independent-minded region, ASEAN doesn't oppose military and political alliance of some members with external powers (e.g. Philippines and Singapore with the US).

In terms political security cooperation, the inclusion of countries in Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) suggests that ASEAN's goal is indeed to be inclusive of all countries in the region, despite different ideologies. ASEAN saw the potentials and wanted to take advantage of the GMS cooperation, which had been established with initiatives from the United Nations, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and South Vietnam. The cooperation opened ways for countries in GMS, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, to exploit the waterways for energy, irrigation, transportation and fisheries instead of engaging in on-and-off wars like they used to be (Mya Than & George Abonyi 2001). So there is a foundation to belief that GMS countries would evolve stronger when tied together in a frame of cooperation.

Over time, we also see how ASEAN built more tools for confidence building measures among members and beyond. The creation of ZOPFAN (Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality) on November 27, 1971 was aimed at declaring shared responsibility for members to create social stability in the region and to reject any forms of external interference in any manifestation in the region. The idea also was to preserve local identities which would bring closer cooperation and trust among members. In Declaration of ASEAN Concord in Bali 1974, such commitment is strengthened with the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) to respect ZOPFAN and

if any inter-country problems happen in the region, immediate actions would be taken to settle dispute in most effective and efficient means. In the treaty, members agree that the use of force against each other should never be done and everyone agree to refrain from interference in other countries' internal affairs. The tool chosen to manage tension was cooperation.

Today TAC becomes the tool to reach out to big powers and non-Southeast Asian countries with stakes in Southeast Asia such as the United States, European Union, India, China, even Australia, Russia and New Zealand. In the political security front, there is ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) formed in 1994, a dialog forum to build confidence among ASEAN members and partners and to be utilized as preventive diplomacy in the region. This forum is used as a tool to reduce tensions and avert the possibility of war by eliminating elements of secrecy in military activity, discussing potential adversary, and working together in building norms and communication lines that would enhance confidence with each other. By being members of ARF, countries agree to manage tension, avoid conflict, and find peaceful resolution in cost-effective ways. In ARF, ASEAN has 10 dialogue partners (Australia, Canada, China, the EU, India, Japan, New Zealand, ROK, Russia and the United States), one ASEAN observer (PNG) as well as the DPRK, Mongolia, Pakistan, East Timor, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

So, the strength of ASEAN as a regional organization is supported by three major commitments:

1. amity based on respect and principle of non-intervention,
2. confidence to each other that most effective and efficient ways to settle tension and dispute would be chosen, and
3. ASEAN as instrument to strengthen cooperation for member countries and with those beyond.

These factors alone are unique, where ASEAN is never intended to be exclusive but rather as a key instrument agreed by all members and any countries "passing" this region to settle potential differences. The vision of ASEAN has been built for further futures.

The tricky part here is the commitment that is exclusive for the member, isn't it? What is cooperation if the members cannot feel any exclusive benefits for being members? On the one hand ASEAN has provided prestige in international relations, which is crucial for diplomacy by developing countries but the "openness" of ASEAN as a regional cooperation allows the challenges for ASEAN centrality to grow.

The Fourth Major Commitment

Any organizations, especially those that have chosen to legalize its status as binding organizations with standard-operating-procedures applied to members, need to keep evolving based on the needs and wants of members. By choosing to be an organization that is based on compliance, ASEAN must be present to cater to the needs of members and, to some extent, just to members. The plus-plus partners may enjoy some benefits, but theirs should be a second or third priority. In other words, when ASEAN codified its norms, rules and values and established the ASEAN Charter on December 15, 2008, there is a responsibility (and automatic expectation from members) to set clear (tangible) results for ASEAN members and then hold accountability to their achievements over time.

How to reconcile this fourth major commitment with the previous three?

All must return to the members of ASEAN. The Secretariat of ASEAN, which is agreed to be the focal points of actions,

coordination and direction for members, can only be strong when empowered by initiatives, people and financial support from members. Unlike a corporation whose board of executives can be recruited apart from the pool of internal people, ASEAN board of executives must be selected from ASEAN bests.

But I am not going to dissect the management issues within ASEAN here. After all, as much as it is a legal institution, ASEAN was and still is a political organization. It exists and remains strong for political reasons and because of political commitments from the higher authorities in each country members. Here, the nature of conflicts today becomes an important variable to take into account in the strength of ASEAN.

Robert Kaplan (2011) wrote in *Foreign Policy*, that the future of world conflict is in the sea in Asia. He made notes on the high potential for world-class conflict emanating from the South China Sea conflict. Paul Wolfowitz, former US Ambassador to Indonesia who was also the second-senior person from Pentagon, said in 2009 that if only ASEAN as a regional organization is absent, conflicts between Asian countries might escalate to an unprecedented level.

In parts, although very implicitly, Robert Kaplan had sensed the unsettled issues among members in ASEAN, which is territorial borders. On the seas, there are no agreements yet (that is not even pending) on borders between Indonesia-Philippines, Malaysia let alone with non-members such as Indonesia-Timor Leste, Indonesia-Australia, Philippines-China, Malaysia-China and so-on. On land, there is still pending homework on border agreements or monitoring between Thailand-Cambodia, Indonesia-Malaysia,

Logically, if non-intervention is among the major commitments of ASEAN, then the unsettled border agreements could jeopardize relations. Yetwe should remember that ASEAN came together because of bad relations between them in the first place. Would they render to destructive measures facing challenges in their border front? It would jeopardize their efforts for decades, wouldn't it? This is *the first dilemma* that would keep ASEAN members in amity with each other despite tensions. There are problems but highlighting the problem for the sake of raising the issues would trigger more problems.

Secondly, the world has changed. Theories have suggested that the practice of international relations in the 21st century have changed much compared to the previous century. The complexity have grown much due to the growing numbers and types of actors involved, i.e. state and non-state actors (from business mogul to media professionals, criminals and Non-Governmental Organizations). The number of diplomatic activities have more than tripled in the past decade (Leguey-Feilleux, 2011); requiring heads of states, ministers and diplomats to travel extensively and frequently around the world to "make a difference" in their missions. While conventional power of military weapons and nuclear still creates jitters in the relationships among countries, the socio-economic interdependence among nations have induced countries to be more cautious in building relationship with other countries.

As noted by Temsak Chalermpalanupap (2009), there were no summits held during ASEAN's first decade. But in the wake of ASEAN's inaugural summit in 1976, meetings among the top leaders of the members grew more frequent and more formal. By 2007 there are summits of ASEAN Plus One (with Japan, South Korea and India); ASEAN Plus Three (with China, Japan, and South Korea) and since 2005 the East Asia Summit (EAS) comprising

ASEAN, Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea. There are also more ministerial sectors involved in ASEAN meetings including economics, finance, culture, society and environment. There are also other meeting formats including Senior Official Meetings (SOM), committees, subcommittees and task forces.

In other words, there is the component of "pooling of resources" that members have invested through dozens summits and thousands of coordinative meetings. When ASEAN enlarged its membership to 10 nation-states, the numbers of meetings proliferated even more. Would members risk those investments by hardening positions against each other? It is most likely not. This is the *second dilemma* that would keep ASEAN members in amity with each other despite tensions.

Tough talk between policymakers is by no means the dominant tone of conversation between countries, even if they are so eager to resort to it. It is not the tone that would make things workable. In the 21st century engagement of countries, there is no such thing as non-negotiable values. Core values are neither absolute nor rigid. The interdependence between nation-states has rendered rigidity impossible in managing difficult situations. Hence we need to explore the interpretations and transformation of those values for countries under consideration (Joseph Fraenkel 1979, p.93). Fraenkel once mentioned that the common denominator of all countries' traditional basic core values is self-preservation, which is flexibly defined, not only in political and socio-economic structure but also in ideological and cultural aspects. With increasing levels of comprehensive partnerships, regionalism and multilateralism, this way of looking at the defense of other countries would be more useful than comparing claims of sovereignty.

The increasing mobility of people, money, investment, and information across borders had rendered rigid core-values of people, state and government obsolete. While ASEAN citizens have yet to all feel and speak on behalf of ASEAN, the identity of ASEAN is an important part of discourse across ASEAN countries. Most people in ASEAN may not know everything about ASEAN but they won't discard ASEAN either. There is something emotional about ASEAN among members, which is mostly about having friends to collaborate with in the uncertainty of world affairs. Among diplomats in ASEAN, the emotion is even greater, which is anchored on the hope for having a big single community that is economically advanced and politically respected around the world. Such hope is what keeps the "investments" among members going through ASEAN activities.

So, when it comes to creating exclusive benefits for ASEAN members, the existing opportunity for that is the array of partnerships with the ASEAN Plus members and beyond. The politicians and diplomats in ASEAN are the ones mostly at work for garnering such partnerships. At least at the current stage, they are the busiest one. They build links, networks and dialogs which foster connections between governments, business entities and in very few instances also academic/research institutions.

An important project for ASEAN members is the ASEAN Connectivity project. The idea of this project was first proposed by Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva at the Opening Ceremony of the 42nd ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting on July 20, 2009 in Phuket, Thailand. He proposed that "community connectivity" should be one objectives of the ASEAN Community 2015, meaning that goods, people, investments and initiatives should travel obstacle-free throughout the region. ASEAN's software and hardware should be

connected. The initiative was endorsed and a Master Plan was created. On October 28, 2010, ASEAN adopted the Hanoi Declaration of the Adoption of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity, giving task to ministers, ASEAN Connectivity Coordinating Committee and the National Coordinators supported by the ASEAN Secretariat to oversee the implementation of the plan and report back to ASEAN Leaders.

A study by the Center of Policy Analysis and Development for Asia-Pacific and African Region at the Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2011) concludes that the ASEAN Connectivity project is central to promote growth and cross-border socioeconomic interaction among ASEAN members. If all country members share a strategic vision with strong commitment for all, then the limitations of current infrastructure facilities could be improved significantly. To date, there is still big homework not only in land connectivity but also in maritime connectivity. If the ASEAN Connectivity project works well, all parts of the countries in ASEAN would not only enjoy business and social connectivity but also get the power generation they need for industrialization in the remote areas.

The ASEAN Connectivity project is among those that ASEAN as a legal organization should take accountability on and where members could feel the exclusive and direct benefits for being ASEAN members. Such project shows us *the third dilemma* in ASEAN that then ties members together, i.e. that they can only grow stronger as economic powers if they join hands in building connectivity. On the one hand, the connectivity project is very costly financially. The socioeconomic gaps between members of ASEAN are significant; some members are not happy if they have to minimize the gap through aids to the less-wealthy member countries. In the face of foreign investments and cooperation, there are occasions where some member countries prefer to stand on its own identity rather than as ASEAN members. On the other hand, the bigger goodness of developments coming from partnership of ASEAN Plus can only be felt through ASEAN membership. Projects as big as the ASEAN Connectivity attract series of foreign investments.

Indeed, the fourth major commitment of ASEAN, which is to bind members in agreements and concert of actions have generated more energy and hope to the world. It gives hope to non-ASEAN members that ASEAN after all could be a reliable organization that can make decisions and act on behalf of members. It gives a new meaning to the "ASEAN way" where Acharya (2001) mentioned that members are tied by norms. With the ASEAN Charter commitment, members have the responsibility to speak as one through one policy.

Is it too tough for ASEAN? Let us scrutinize this fourth major commitment of ASEAN. David Martin Jones (2008) argued that the ASEAN Charter promotes two incompatible norms: one that maintains the traditional formula of non-interference in internal affairs as the basis of regional peace, and one that promotes democracy and fundamental freedoms. He noted that the Charter calls, though somewhat ambiguously, for regional transformation, namely a transformation in the "legal and institutional framework" for the "promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms". Hence implicitly the Charter calls for active strengthening of democratic values, good governance and rejection of unconstitutional and undemocratic change of government.

It would rather be more cautious in concluding that ASEAN is promoting two incompatible norms. I'd say instead that this is a reflection of *the fourth dilemma* that

binds member countries in ASEAN together, namely in responding to global pressure for good governance and liberal model of government accountability. Not all country members in ASEAN agree with the commitment implied in ASEAN Charter, but there is not much choice. The risk for standing alone on this issue is far greater. Hence, the ASEAN's goal of promoting human rights and protecting freedoms should be seen from the perspective of political adjustment to the changing nature of diplomacy today.

In the past, diplomacy did not go much further than bridging communication and cooperation between nations. At most diplomats may be assigned for counter-intelligence activities, but changing domestic politics remained the domain of politicians rather than diplomats. Today, diplomacy bears the responsibility to promote similar values to partner countries, and diplomats must be sensitive to the domestic political developments of partners. Consequently, it is quite common today to observe missions for bringing like-minded-countries together and closer to each other. And the mission is clearer, which is to endorse leaders and countries that support peaceful elections as mechanism for transfer of power. Why? Partly because democratic countries are believed to garner more peace and distribute more to people (Ratnitzky, 2003) and partly because democratic governance is believed to be the triumphant and final form of human government (Fukuyama, 1992).

Imagine if each country member in ASEAN must bear such international pressure alone. The governments in Singapore, Malaysia and Myanmar, for instance, would easily be condemned for their lack of support in democratic practices. Standing alone as individual countries, they would be prone to external intervention for "more democratic change" in their governance. Together as ASEAN members, however, they'd be buffered by the "ASEAN Way" of transition; smoother and more suitable in pace of change.Or if one wants to speak more bluntly, ASEAN would provide the blanket security (and guarantee too) foranyone cooperating with ASEAN members that peace and the values democracy and freedom are understood in Southeast Asia.

Diplomacy as ASEAN's Lifeline

As we can see, ASEAN is unique in that it has been sustained by tensions and dilemmas across stakeholders and time. If in other forms of regionalism there is a strong secretariat that operates based on centralization of power pooled from the authorities of country members, in ASEAN the practice has been different.

Zhongqi Pan (2008) grouped ASEAN regionalism together with East Asian regionalism which is open, inclusive, and soft (because it was driven by smaller nations and followed by great powers) compared to the European Union model that is closed, exclusive and hard (because it was driven by great powers and followed by smaller nations). Implicit in his analysis is the doubt that ASEAN regionalism is defined by the members, and not by the great powers engaged in its frameworks of cooperation. He described the non-uniform approach toward each other, e.g. China and Japan chose different paths in its relations to the United States. Consequently, it brings implications in the relations of ASEAN with the United States.

On similar note, Peter Katzenstein(1996) gave recognition to the unique regionalism in Asia. He argued that regionalism in this region is created on the basis of Asian identity, which is the result of interaction between real and imagined factors. It was a

product of globalization and the growing links of economic activities.

Katzenstein, however failed to recognize the socio-political and security reasons behind Asia's, particularly ASEAN's, regionalism. ASEAN as regional cooperation and institution is more than just an economic instrument for deeper cooperation among members.

The case of ASEAN demonstrates that regionalism may go beyond promoting similar interest and values. Instead, regionalism can also be a product of awareness of stark differences, challenges, and dilemmas surrounding the relationship among members and beyond. The case of tensions and disagreements among members and beyond, such as that found in South China Sea, therefore should not be seen as a challenge that weakens ASEAN. On the contrary, it gives more reasons for members to stick together.

Of course, one must understand that as a political institution, ASEAN is messy in decision making process. There are times when disagreements occur and no joint-statement can be made. And there is nothing wrong about it. Each party of dialog in ASEAN learns to speak their mind and fight for what they believe. After all this is an organization of the less-like-minded nations. But at the end of the day, it is much more sensible to keep working together as members of ASEAN than to stand alone in the harsh international politics.

The key here is diplomacy among members. The intensive talks and break-down of activities is the lifeline of ASEAN. At some points, members must see the exclusive benefits for being ASEAN members. The pride for being ASEAN must be disseminated as broad as possible among citizens of ASEAN. At the end of the day this would help ASEAN more alive.

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