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ASEAN's centrality in a rising Asia

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Abstract

MUCH has been made over the last decade on the rise of Asia and the continent's increasingly important role in global politics. As a ten-member political community, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) represents a significant presence within Asia and is viewed by many as a successful experiment in regional conflict regulation and cooperation. Over the years, the region has featured in the policy-making discourse of the big powers, in particular from the United States and China with increasing regularity. Paralleling the prominence that ASEAN receives from the big powers is the growing emphasis among its own members on "ASEAN centrality" - the notion of an ASEAN-led regional architecture in which the region's relations with the wider world are conducted with the interest of the ASEAN community in mind. This article will thus explore the concept of "ASEAN centrality" and the extent to which this concept is being understood and appropriated in ASEAN's dealings with both Washington and Beijing.

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ASEAN's centrality in a rising Asia

Introduction

MUCH has been made over the last decade about the rise of Asia – led by China and India – and the continent's increasingly important role in global politics. The ten-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), comprising some 600 million people, represents a significant portion of Asia and is viewed by many as a successful experiment in regional conflict regulation and cooperation.[1] Sitting astride significant sea routes between the Indian and Pacific oceans, ASEAN is economically and strategically vital to the emerging economies of Asia; its regional waters, including the South China Sea, are also the passageways by which a substantial share of international trade passes through.[2] Over the years, the region has featured in the policy-making discourse of the big powers, in particular the United States and China, with increasing regularity.

Paralleling the prominence that ASEAN receives from the big powers is the growing emphasis among its own members on "ASEAN centrality" - the notion of its leading role in a regional architecture by which the region's relations with the wider world are conducted, and the interest of the ASEAN community is promoted. According to the ASEAN Political and Security Community blueprint, this centrality would act as "the driving force in charting the evolving regional architecture." [3] In the words of its secretary-general, Surin Pitsuwan, "ASEAN has earned the place to play a central role in the evolving regional architecture by virtue of not only being the hub in economic integration initiatives in the region but also by being able to provide the platform for political and economic dialogue and engagement

[1] Acharya, Amitav, Regionalism and Multilateralism: Essays on Cooperative Security in the Asia-Pacific (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2002).

[2] Desker, Barry, "Foreword", in Sam Bateman, Jane Chan and Euan Graham, eds., ASEAN and the Indian Ocean: The Key Maritime Links (RSIS Policy Paper, 2011) Accessed at http://www.rsis.edu.sg/publications/policy_papers/RSIS_PolicyPaperASEAN_A4_211011.pdf (9 Mar 2012)

[3] ASEAN Political and Security Community Blueprint. Accessed at http://www.ASEANsec.org/5187-18.pdf (9 Mar 2012)

among major global players." [4] ASEAN is engaged in a two-fold enterprise to bring about an ASEAN community in 2015 and steer the Asia-Pacific region towards an East Asian community through the nascent East Asia summit. In light of the increasingly complex and multifaceted nature of global challenges, the challenge for ASEAN is to build on ASEAN centrality without losing its focus and become divided over great power rivalries in the region. Anxieties over big power relations and the uncertainties of how these interactions would play out could lead ASEAN member states to possibly disengage from global challenges and instead develop parochial and isolationist tendencies. That could lead ASEAN states to adopt an inward-looking approach to regional engagement and become marginalized by the rise of Asia.

This article will explore the concept of "ASEAN centrality" and the extent to which this concept is being appropriated both regionally and internationally. This centrality, I argue, while it gives institutional expression and voice to the global aspirations of ASEAN member states, is less useful within the intramural dealings of ASEAN, which is still steeped in the realist tradition whereby principles of state independence, territorial integrity, and maintenance of the political status quo are being upheld. [5] Furthermore, this practice of ASEAN centrality, insofar as it is being collectively appropriated by member states, is mostly exercised within economic dealings and is less applicable when decisions involving security concerns are involved. Illustrative of this are the relations between Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia as well as relations between the Burmese, the Thai, the Khmer and the Vietnamese. They have gone through "cycles of greatness, decline and rivalry", all of which have influenced their security perceptions.[6] Such a "security complex"[7], as Barry Buzan terms it,

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[4] Surin Pitsuwan. Speech made at the 16th ASEAN Economic Ministers meeting. Putrajaya, Malaysia, 1 Mar 2010. Accessed at http://www.ASEAN.org/24339.htm (12 Mar 2012)

[5] Weatherbee. Donald. E, International Relations in Southeast Asia: The Struggle for Autonomy. (Oxford, UK: Rowman & Litlefield, 2005), p. 17

[6] Edy Prasetyono. 'Traditional Challenges to States: Intra-ASEAN Conflicts and ASEAN's Relations with External Powers' in Hiro Katsumata & See Seng Tan, eds., People's ASEAN and Governments' ASEAN. RSIS Monograph No. 11. (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2007) pp. 109-117

[7] Barry Buzan. 'The Southeast Asia Security Complex', Contemporary Southeast Asia 10, no. 1 (June 1988), p. 4

imposes limits to the extent in which ASEAN – as a political community of nations – is able to develop its own institutional capacities in responding to global challenges; furthermore, with the increasing presence of big power influence within the region, it remains to be seen whether the "ASEAN way" of "soft" regionalism is sufficiently suitable as a modus operandi for ASEAN to negotiate the contours and interactions of big power plays.

ASEAN's Identity and Global Positioning

During the 45th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) held in Phnom Penh in July 2012, the ASEAN community found itself staring at an unprecedented diplomatic crisis over a regional issue involving a big power. For the first time in its history, members of the regional bloc were unable to issue a joint communiqué following heated political wrangling between the incumbent Cambodian chair and other ASEAN member states over their South China Sea disputes involving China. This outcome clearly shocked ASEAN, political leaders and diplomatic observers. Both the foreign ministers of Singapore and Indonesia also expressed great disappointment at the outcome, terming it as "irresponsible" and having left a "severe dent" on ASEAN's credibility.[8] A former Singapore diplomat, Tan Seng Chye, wrote that the outcome of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) was a "significant watershed in ASEAN's history" and should be "taken seriously by ASEAN as a wake-up call."[9] ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan, a persistent and strident advocate of ASEAN's cohesive capability, admitted that the incident had left the ASEAN community with the need "to do some soul-searching…and be more cohesive among ourselves."[10] This recognition that ASEAN is no longer a political bystander but an active participant in international affairs was emphasized at the 2011 East Asia Summit (EAS) in Bali as Indonesia's President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono noted that ASEAN - as a community -had to take proactive steps to engage and address the global challenges arising. "In this increasingly complex and interconnected world, ASEAN must truly be at the forefront to address the many challenges that arise. ASEAN cannot just be a passive audience, a vulnerable victim to problems from

[8] Irwin Loy. 'Asean Members Fail to Draft South China Sea Statement'. Voice of America, 12 July 2012; 'Severe Dent on ASEAN's credibility'. Today, 14 July 2012.

[9] Tan Seng Chye. 'After the Phnom Penh AMM Failure: ASEAN needs to regain cohesion and solidarity'. RSIS Commentaries No. 129/2012 dated 16 July 2012.

[10] Pia Lee-Brago. 'Asean should do some soul-searching'. The Philippine Star, 15 July 2012.

other parts of the world."[11] His Singaporean counterpart, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, concurred, while choosing to emphasize the importance of a "tightly knit ASEAN" to his country's interests as it would link the Republic to a "bigger life raft" if it were hit by a crisis. Said Mr Lee, "If you have a storm coming in your direction, you have something to hang onto which is more cohesive and integrated." [12]

It can be argued that implicit in the public statements made by both leaders are two distinct – though not entirely mutually exclusive – views of how ASEAN is being conceived. The first view, as epitomized by President Yudhoyono's statements, views ASEAN as being a *leader and driver* within the EAS while the second view, as Prime Minister Lee puts it, conceives of ASEAN as a *lever and facilitator* on which smaller member states are able to count upon in order to frame, safeguard and promote their national interests within the larger auspices of a regional political community.

How these two views can square with one another is a subject for debate. Current mainstream literature on ASEAN suggests regionalism in East Asia has historically been process- rather than product-oriented.[13] This emphasis on the *how* and not just the *what* in policy-making has given rise to what scholars term as the "ASEAN Way", which emphasizes dialogue, consultation, consensus-building, and non-binding commitments. [14] These practices were embodied in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) promulgated by the founding members of ASEAN in 1976. Its proponents asserted that the ASEAN way was unique in that "these norms were operationalized into a framework of regional interaction" that "contrasted with the adversarial posturing and legalistic decision-making procedures in Western

[11] President Yudhoyono's speech at the opening ceremony of the 19th ASEAN summit. Accessed at http://www.ASEANsummit.org/news192-speech--his-excellency-dr.-susilo-bambang-yudhoyono--president-of-the-republic-of-indonesia--at-opening-ceremony-of-the-19th-ASEAN-summit-nusa-dua,-bali,-17-november-2011.html (14 March 2012)

[12] Hussain, Zakir. 'PM: East Asia Summit hit good balance'. The Sunday Times. 20 Nov 2011. Accessed at http://www.pmo.gov.sg/content/pmosite/mediacentre/inthenews/primeminister/2011/November/pm_east_asia_summithitgoodbalance.html, (14 March 2012)

[13] Emmers, Ralf. 'Introduction', in Ralf Emmers, ed., ASEAN and the Institutionalization of East Asia. (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 1

[14] Takeshi Yuzawa, 'The Fallacy of Socialization', in Ralf Emmers, Ibid. p. 75;

multilateral negotiations." [15] The annual ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) - inaugurated in 1994 - which brings 27 Asia-Pacific countries together in a multilateral security setting, provided ASEAN with the opportunity to demonstrate its diplomatic adroitness by forging cooperation among disparate political communities. According to the ASEAN Concept Paper drawn up in 1995, the ARF would not have a secretariat and its decisions would be made by consensus; moreover, the forum would progress "at a pace comfortable to all participants", an approach noted by former ASEAN Secretary-General Rodolfo Severino that gives the reassurance that "nobody would railroad or ram through measures that others might deem to be threatening to them." [16] Furthermore, the ARF's concept of security was "comprehensive", including not only military aspects but also political, economic, social and other issues".

Nevertheless, the ARF process over the years has been criticized by scholars for being unable to aptly deal with matters of regional security. [17] Even before the latest Phnom Penh AMM fracas, conflicts in East Timor, Aceh, Myanmar and Southern Thailand have been flashpoints. Noting the ARF's lack of a specific "road map" or blueprint for action, Amitav Acharya adds that the forum's major selling point, "inclusiveness", is also its "principal drawback, given the sheer diversity of security concerns within the Asia-Pacific region and the obvious difficulties in achieving agreement from the relatively large membership of the ARF". [18] Others note the gap between ASEAN's rhetorical aspiration and regional reality, which thwarts ASEAN's objective of forging "regional resilience" and constrains its commitment to tackling emerging regional issues.[19]

All these once again raise the question concerning ASEAN's identity and the extent to which this is being shared by the ASEAN political community. According to Kraft, at ASEAN's inception, the key priority among ASEAN member states was that of insulating

[15] David Martin Jones & Michael L.R. Smith. 'ASEAN's Imitation Community', in See Seng Tan, ed., Regionalism in Asia, Vol 1 (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 312

[16] Severino, Rodolfo, C. The ASEAN Regional Forum. (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009) pp. 16-17

[17] See Seng Tan, ed., Regionalism in Asia, Vol 1 (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 283-328.

[18] Ibid, p. 296

[19] Ibid, p. 312

intra-ASEAN relations from extra-regional dynamics. As such, the behavioral norms embodied in the ASEAN Way were intended to allow member states to pursue internally directed policies of development and political consolidation without having to be concerned about unstable external relations. [20] Acharya likewise argues that "the ASEAN Way of problem-solving…was developed when the threat of communist expansions served as a cementing factor for its otherwise divided membership. It is doubtful whether these norms and practices can be duplicated within a wider regional setting." [21] In other words, one can argue that ASEAN's goal – in its early years – was more about *avoiding* the pitfalls of being embroiled in great power rivalries than it was about *accommodating*, let alone being actively engaged with them.

This, however, is no longer the case today as the fortunes of ASEAN and those of the world become increasingly intertwined. Singapore's Ambassador-at-large, Tommy Koh, speaking about the EAS, for instance, notes that "ASEAN's aspirations is to embed [the big powers] in a cooperative mechanism, thereby reducing misunderstanding and suspicion among them and enhancing the prospects for peace in Asia."[22] The desire to both at once engage the big powers while at the same time avoid being entangled in the web of these relations has resulted in the use of an "enmeshment" strategy whereby ASEAN institutional centrality would be maintained. [23] This centrality, it is observed, is traditionally premised upon ASEAN being a "neutral platform" for the major powers to meet so as to avoid the dominance of a single power within the East Asian region. [24]To what extent this neutrality can be sustained, in light of changing political dynamics - both the US and China have

[20] Herman Joseph S. Kraft. 'Driving East Asian regionalism: The reconstruction of ASEAN's identity', in Ralf Emmers, ed., ASEAN and the Institutionalization of East Asia. (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 63

[21] Acharya, Amitav, Regionalism and Multilateralism: Essays on Cooperative Security in the Asia-Pacific (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2002). p. 189

[22] Koh, T. 'The United States and Southeast Asia', in American's Role in Asia: Asian and American views (San Francisco, CA: The Asia Foundation, 2008), pp. 35-54

[23] Ba, Alice. 'ASEAN centrality imperiled?' in Ralf Emmers, ed., ASEAN and the Institutionalization of East Asia. (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 122- 124

[24] Tan Seng Chye. 'Changing Global Landscape and Enhanced US Engagement with Asia – Challenges and Emerging Trends, Asia-Pacific Review, 2012, 19:1, pp. 108-129

reiterated their long-term interests to the region – remains to be seen. The fact that ASEAN's institutional priorities which traditionally prioritized mutuality, mutual respect and an ethic of self-restraint also lies in sharp contrast to the "functional cooperation" that is emphasized by other key actors, especially the United States, and raises the question concerning ASEAN's global positioning and the extent to which an exclusive ASEAN-centric approach is able to effectively mediate major power relations within the region. [25]

ASEAN Centrality: A "Muddied" Multilateralism Strategy?

As noted earlier, the ARF has traditionally been the forum whereby the ASEAN community, together with other major powers, come together to discuss security issues in a multilateral setting. This multilateral character of the ARF, however, raises questions concerning its efficacy, and whether it is truly the "go-to" channel in times of real security needs. Indeed, some scholars have highlighted that ASEAN states have in fact, relied primarily on global institutions and national instruments, and secondarily on their own regional institutions, for their security. [26] Nevertheless, as noted by Acharya, ASEAN's practice of not bringing sensitive issues to the multilateral "does not mean that multilateralism has been irrelevant to conflict resolution, [rather] it means that multilateralism was viewed by its members not as a legal or formal framework for interactions, but as *creating a conductive socio-psychological setting for intra-mural solving*" [27](italics mine). It is also pointed out that this avoidance of sensitive issues on the multilateral agenda by the ASEAN members was also partly due to recognition that such issues were better dealt with at the bilateral level. [28] Indeed, this difficulty then of reconciling individual states' interests with those of a broader ASEAN community is aptly recognized by former Singapore's foreign minister, S. Rajaratnam, following the ASEAN Bangkok Declaration of 1967: "It is necessary for us, if we are really to be successful in giving life to ASEAN, to marry national

[25] Ibid

[26] Bates Gill, Michael Green, Kiyoto Tsuji and William Watts. Strategic Views on Asian Regionalism: Survey results and Analysis (Washington, DC: CSIS, Feb 2009) p. vi

[27] Acharya, Amitav. Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the problem of regional order, 2nd ed. (NY: Routledge, 2009) pp. 84-85

[28] Ibid

thinking with regional thinking [and] we must also accept the fact, if we are really serious about it, that regional existence means painful adjustments." [29]

The declaration of the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in 1971 has also been criticized as being "long on rhetoric and short on substance" as "internal contradictions [within] ZOPFAN meant that beyond diplomatic circles, it was never taken seriously".[30] ASEAN's subsequent signing of the TAC in 1976 also failed to improve ASEAN's capacity to act in enforcing peace. For instance, there was little ASEAN could do when Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978; likewise, ASEAN has yet to weigh in with a collective voice on matters of regional security. As one scholar comments, ASEAN is a "mere bystander" in the Korean nuclear crisis and would rather pass the buck to the big powers (US & China) when it comes to addressing North Korea's nuclear ambitions. [31]

Reflecting on these, I argue that the idea of ASEAN centrality, that is, an ASEAN community speaking with "one voice" is a concept that is, at best, a useful political slogan. The use of ASEAN centrality - as a multilateralism strategy - is severely limited. Indeed the literature on multilateralism suggests that for effective multilateralism, more than just the nominal presence (of three or more states) is required. What needs to be interrogated includes also the *kind of relations* that are being instituted among these states as well as the strength of these relations.[32] In the case of ASEAN, one might conceivably argue that the "unfinished and urgent task of [ASEAN's] internal consolidation acts as an important constraint to ASEAN's ability to play its brokerage role vis-à-vis the great powers and regional order in East Asia."[33] Furthermore, as Weatherbee notes, "Although states' interest in ASEAN's

[29] Ibid, p. 86

[30] Tang Siew Mun. 'No Community Sans Concert?' in Tan See Seng, ed., Do Institutions Matter? Regional Institutions and Regionalism in East Asia. RSIS Monograph No. 13. (Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2008) pp. 64-65

[31] Ibid

[32] Ruggie, John Gerard, ed., Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form (NY: Columbia University Press), p. 6

[33] Evelyn Goh. 'Institutions and the great power bargain in East Asia: ASEAN's limited brokerage role', in Ralf Emmers, ed., ASEAN and the Institutionalization of East Asia. (London: Routledge, 2012) p. 113

integrity may buffer the intensity of national interest competition, it has not eliminated it."[34] Indeed the conflicts among ASEAN member states are often rooted in "historic and ethnic antagonisms" that show little signs of dissipating, and which, in fact, "take on new meanings in contemporary nationalism."[35]

According to Caporaso, the foundations of multilateralism are distinguished from other forms by three properties, namely, indivisibility, generalized principles of conduct, and diffuse reciprocity. [36] In brief, I argue that all three characteristics are found to be wanting within the ASEAN community. Firstly, the interests of ASEAN states are not indivisible from each other; on the contrary, one might make the argument that ASEAN's present fortunes (economic or political) came about as a result of ASEAN states' willingness to align their fortunes with the rest of the world, and not just among themselves. Secondly, few, if any, generalized patterns of conduct can be found among these states; indeed the ASEAN Way of soft consensus has been criticized for fostering "habits of non-implementation" and the promotion of "negative social interactions" thus raising questions concerning whether any pattern of actionable conduct can be discerned. [37] Thirdly, the history of intramural conflicts in Southeast Asia also casts aspersions concerning the extent of ASEAN states' reciprocity towards one another and whether they expect "to benefit in the long run and over many issues, rather than every time on every issue."[38] As Weatherbee puts it, "ASEAN's incapacity to move to a politically integrative level above noninterference and respect for domestic sovereignty suggests that notwithstanding claims of community, interstate relations in the

[34] Weatherbee. Donald. E, International Relations in Southeast Asia: The Struggle for Autonomy. (Oxford, UK: Rowman & Litlefield, 2005), p. 120

[35] Ibid

[36] James A. Caporaso, 'International Relations Theory and Multilateralism: The Search for Foundations', in John Gerard Ruggie, ed., Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form (NY: Columbia University Press), p. 53.

[37] Takeshi Yuzawa, 'The Fallacy of Socialization', in Ralf Emmers, ed., ASEAN and the Institutionalization of East Asia. (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 80-86

[38] James A. Caporaso, 'International Relations Theory and Multilateralism: The Search for Foundations', in John Gerard Ruggie, ed., Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form (NY: Columbia University Press), p. 54.

ASEAN region are not really different from relations among states in the world, governed by calculations of national interest and relative power."[39]

Moreover, as Severino points out, what is lacking in ASEAN – as a community of nations – is "the feeling of belonging, the conviction that members matter to one another and to the group, and the faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together".[40] This suggests that the ASEAN community – despite its much vaunted claims of centrality - remains divided in as far as states' core interests are concerned; as such, the question concerning the robustness – and relevance - of ASEAN's centrality needs to be posed, especially in its dealings with the two major superpowers, the United States and China. This will be the focus of my subsequent discussion.

ASEAN and the Great Powers

As highlighted earlier, the design of the ASEAN community – in its formative years – was to allow member states to avoid being drawn into a protracted US-Soviet Cold War conflict. In a post-Cold War context, such a strategy of avoidance is clearly not tenable. Since the 1990s, the role of ASEAN has shifted from that of a reticent to an active passenger. Indeed, the ASEAN Way was also said to be projected as a means of multilateral engagement that was acceptable to all participating states in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN-Plus mechanisms.[41] Not surprisingly, talk of ASEAN occupying the "driver seat" in key regional institutions has also gained increased momentum. [42] It is also observed that ASEAN's model of "brokering" great power relations turns on the institution providing

[39] Weatherbee. Donald. E, International Relations in Southeast Asia: The Struggle for Autonomy. (Oxford, UK: Rowman & Litlefield, 2005), p. 123

[40] Rodolfo Severino. 'A Sense of Community for Southeast Asia' in Hiro Katsumata & See Seng Tan, eds., People's ASEAN and Governments' ASEAN. RSIS Monograph No. 11. (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2007) pp. 17-25

[41] Evelyn Goh. 'Institutions and the great power bargain in East Asia: ASEAN's limited brokerage role', in Ralf Emmers, ed., ASEAN and the Institutionalization of East Asia. (London: Routledge, 2012) p. 105

[42] Abdul Khalik & Sita Winiawati Dewi, 'Looking beyond 2015, RI wants a common platform for ASEAN', Jakarta Post, 5 May 2011; 'Forty Years of ASEAN: Can the EU be a model for Asia?' Speech made by Ong Keng Yong, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Berlin, 16 July 2007

unique fora for greater power dialogue and confidence-building, and for acting as demonstration precincts from which greater powers can demonstrate their commitment to the region. [43]

The announcement in November 2011 by U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton on America's "pivot towards Asia" was met with varied responses among ASEAN's military establishment. Singapore's Defense Minister, Dr Ng Eng Hen, mentioned the ongoing presence of the US in the Asia-Pacific region as a "critical force for peace and stability for the past half a century" and added that it was America's "pre-eminence" and "forward presence" that provided the vital "strategic assurance" thus guaranteeing regional and financial growth.[44] Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa, however, criticized the move, adding that "ASEAN will not let the region become a competition arena for countries who consider themselves as big powers, whoever and whenever they may be."[45] These differing views suggest that the strength of ASEAN centrality is less coherent than what is publicly projected, and that there exists substantial cleavages among ASEAN member states as to how they ought to respond to perceived big power incursions into the region.

Given the preponderance of influence the US has historically wielded in the region, one can argue that relations between Washington and the ASEAN community, if not always positively perceived by all, are at least substantially institutionalized so as to provide some degree of political predictability. The fact that US' naval primacy within the region helped insulate ASEAN maritime waters from Cold War great power politics suggest that reliance on the US security umbrella is likely to persist, particularly given the rise of China.[46] As one American observer puts it, as relatively small powers "concerned about preserving their

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[43] Evelyn Goh. 'Institutions and the great power bargain in East Asia: ASEAN's limited brokerage role', in Ralf Emmers, ed., ASEAN and the Institutionalization of East Asia. (London: Routledge, 2012) p. 105

[44] Remarks by Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen, at the Center for a New American Security. Accessed at http://www.mindef.gov.sg/content/imindef/news_and_events/nr/2012/apr/05apr12_nr/05apr12_speech.print.html?Status=1 (Apr 26, 2012)

[45] New U.S. Base in RI's Backyard," The Jakarta Post, 17 November, 2011

[46] Juwono Sudarsono, 'Rebalancing East Asia Strategic Engagement,' Strategic Review 1:2 (November-December 2011), p.35

freedom to maneuver vis-à-vis China", the nations of Southeast Asia are prepared to accept American involvement and leadership.[47] Indeed, some 20 years ago, when the US decided to close a major naval base in the Philippines, a new plan known as "places, not bases" was quietly put into effect in Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia, permitting American forces to procure local services to maintain fleet and aircraft mobility and training.[48] The events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent "global war on terrorism" also inadvertently drew many ASEAN countries and the United States into a close security partnership. The late 2000s also witnessed an increased willingness by the US to expand its multilateral efforts within the region as opposed to a historical preference for bilateral security arrangements. [49] In 2011, President Obama announced the establishment of a U.S. Permanent Mission to the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta and the appointment of a resident representative. Together with the participation of Hillary Clinton and President Obama at the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit respectively in the same year, these actions would have certainly alleviated concerns among ASEAN leaders that the US, stretched by its wars in the Middle East and economic problems at home, might chose to dilute its presence within the Asia-Pacific region.

Yet, there are concerns that the United States' soft brand of multilateral internationalism with ASEAN continues to retain a hard-edge realist core to it, that is, to ultimately promote its own interests abroad. According to Mastanduno, US policy-makers throughout the postwar era have treated multilateralism and international institutions in a pragmatic manner and believe that it would be difficult to sustain these as core foreign policy purposes. [50] Likewise, Ba contends that the United States already possesses a well-established system of bilateral alliances and partnerships, going back to the Cold War, which has

[47] Douglas H. Paal. 'China and the East Asian Security Environment: Complementarity and Competition.' in Ezra F. Vogel. ed., Living with China: U.S. – China Relations in the Twenty-first Century (NY: W.W. Norton & Co, 1997) p.111

[48] Ibid.

[49] Jessica Brown. 'Southeast Asia's American Embrace'. Foreign Policy Analysis, 7:8 (29 Mar 2011)

[50] Mastanduno, Michael. 'US regional strategies and global commitments.' in William Tow. ed., Security Politics in the Asia-Pacific: A Regional-Global nexus? (Cambridge University Press, 2009) p.83

historically served its interests quite well while rendering cooperation between different US partners less than necessary.[51] As such, these arrangements have had the effect of institutionalizing "US centrality" and as a result, challenge the ASEAN interest towards "multilateralizing and regionalizing US Asia policy."[52] In this case, the description of ASEAN-centric institutions (ARF, EAS, ADMM) as being the driver of regional politics may prove to be less than accurate; a more plausible reason would be that the United States – in its pursuit of defined objectives – view the regional objectives of the ASEAN community as complementing those that it seeks to pursue within the Asia-Pacific region. As then-US Defense Secretary Robert Gates remarked during the inaugural ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting with their eight dialogue partners (ADMM Plus) in 2010, "The United States has always exercised our rights and supported the rights of others to transit through, and operate in, international waters. This will not change, nor will our commitment to engage in activities and exercises together with our allies and partners."[53] On the other hand, ASEAN countries are more likely to view relationship-building/maintaining among each other as fundamentally necessary to regional (and domestic) well-being and as such, perceive "functional cooperation" (with the US, in this case) to serve the achievement of such ends. [54] *In other words, while the US is more likely to define its political objectives in functional (or positional) terms, ASEAN countries are more likely to perceive their objectives as a result of relational outcomes.* Unfortunately, as Emmers and Tan point out (citing the ARF as a case in point), "the formalization of ASEAN's informal diplomacy" has resulted in "the politicization of the very process of decision-making." [55] All these, note Emmers and Tan, have resulted in distraction from real problem solving, a rigidization of the decision-making process and denied states a commonly agreed process by which to resolve their differences.[56]

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[51] Ba, Alice. 'ASEAN centrality imperiled?' in Ralf Emmers, ed., ASEAN and the Institutionalization of East Asia. (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 127

[52] Ibid.

[53] 'U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates remarks at ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus 9 in Hanoi', 12 October 2010

[54] Ibid.

[55] Emmers, R. & Tan, S. 'The ASEAN Regional Forum and preventive diplomacy: a failure in practice', RSIS Working Paper no. 189, Singapore: RSIS, 2009.

[56] Ibid.

If this is the case, might it be that the concept of ASEAN centrality suffers from a crisis of legitimization? On the one hand, ASEAN states hope that the informal mechanisms offered by the ASEAN Way would provide them with the political cohesion with which to demonstrate solidarity in matters of big power politics, yet the tendency to formalize these ASEAN-centric processes and institutions have severely hampered the extent and effectiveness of these mechanisms in dealing with increased regional and global challenges.

Unlike its relations with the United States, ASEAN relations with China are less clear-cut and consequently, less predictable. The geographical proximity of China, as well as Beijing's territorial and resource claims, have also made the relationship much more testy and nervous at times, particularly over South China Sea claims. As noted by Acharya, China presents the greatest challenge to ASEAN due to its size, economic resources and military strength.[57] Long-term concerns over China's military build-up remain possibly ASEAN's greatest worry. [58]During the 17th ASEAN Regional Forum held in Hanoi, the Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, in response to comments made by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's towards China's claim of the South China Sea, had reportedly disparaged host Vietnam's socialist credentials before directly telling then Singapore's Foreign Minister, George Yeo, that "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that is just a fact".[59] According to accounts, ASEAN members were "taken aback by the ferocity of Beijing's counterattack"[60]; subsequently, a joint statement made at a U.S.-ASEAN leaders meeting saw a highly watered down version which took into account Chinese sensitivities over the South China Sea. More than a year on, it would seem that such concerns with Beijing continue to fester. Singapore's Defence Minister, Ng Eng Hen, in a 2012 interview with The Straits Times, noted that Singapore's defence relations with China, despite having grown closer in recent years, nonetheless remained "qualitatively different" from its relations with the United States, one that is based on a "longer history and shared perspectives on a

[57] Acharya, Amitav. Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the problem of regional order, 2nd ed. (NY: Routledge, 2009) pp. 224-225

[58] Ibid

[59] John Pomfret, 'U.S. Takes a Tougher Line with China', Washington Post, 30 July 2010.

[60] Barry Wain, 'Asean Caught in a Tight Spot', The Straits Times, 16 Sep 2010

range of regional issues."[61] Notwithstanding China's economic influence, there are concerns over Beijing's end-game and whether its intentions are benign or otherwise. The common position often advocated by ASEAN member states is that the economic opportunities presented by China are too important to ignore; however, the fact that most ASEAN countries – with the exception of Myanmar – have no substantial military relationship with China strongly mitigates the extent to which a robust regional architecture can be created between the ASEAN community and China, particularly if issues of defence and national security are not included as part of the overall picture.

According to Acharya, three factors have played a major role in shaping ASEAN's concerns over Chinese power. They are: (I) China's involvement in the Spratly Islands disputes; (II) China's defence modernization programme moving from a people's defence to an offensive power projection capability; and (III) suspicion over an increased "overseas Chinese presence" and its implications for inter-ethnic relations among some ASEAN states.[62] Taken together, these three factors suggest that ASEAN governments continue to view China's foreign policy with some measure of mistrust and suspicion in regards to the stability of the wider region.[63] This is especially so in light of Beijing's territorial and maritime boundary claims in the South China Sea, which has, over the years, generated considerable tensions between China and certain ASEAN countries. This is further exacerbated by the fact that among ASEAN itself, there continues to be a lack of agreement over the issue. Moreover, as Storey notes, the expansion of ASEAN from six to ten members between 1995 and 1999 to include Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia has made it even more challenging for ASEAN to achieve consensus, especially since three of the four countries have close ties with China, and, "without a direct stake in the dispute, seem unwilling to rock the boat with Beijing."[64] This was seen vividly during the 45th AMM in

[61] Chua Chin Hon. 'United States closest defence partner of Singapore'. The Straits Times. Apr 7, 2012

[62] Acharya, Amitav, Regionalism and Multilateralism: Essays on Cooperative Security in the Asia-Pacific (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2002). p. 200

[63] Denny Roy. 'Southeast Asia and China: Balancing or Bandwagoning', Contemporary of Southeast Asia 27, no. 2 (2005), p. 308

[64] Ian Storey, 'ASEAN-China relations'. in Ralf Emmers, ed., ASEAN and the Institutionalization of East Asia. (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 148

Phnom Penh, when the Cambodian chair rejected the Philippines, Vietnam and other ASEAN member states' attempts to insert specific references to developments in the South China Sea. Indeed, Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Hor Namhong had also reportedly declared during an ASEAN meeting that if ASEAN member states could not go along its wishes, then it would have "no more recourse" to deal with the issue and that there would be "no text at all".[65] The fact that Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi was also quoted to have thanked Cambodia for its "staunch support for China on issues relating to China's core interests"[66] further raises the suspicion that Beijing, on present evidence, has somewhat "picked ASEAN apart". [67]

On the other hand, a relatively benign view of Beijing holds that chief among the concerns of the Chinese leadership are economic reform and domestic stability, rather than external military expansion. [68] Such a view also maintains that China's military control over the South China Sea is as yet "insignificant" and that Beijing faces "serious logistical and technological constraints in developing a power projection capability." It adds that while China may succeed in "denying South China Sea resources to other disputants, it cannot secure "exclusive control over them." [69] This benign perception of China is also reinforced by the fact that ASEAN and China also share convergent views on human rights and democracy, and have similar beliefs over the need to resist Western political-cultural influences. Over the years, China's increased participation in most if not all of Asia's major multilateral groupings, as well as its enunciation of a 'New Security Concept' (embodying principles of peaceful coexistence) have also presented a "kinder, gentler and more nuanced approach to

[65] Ho, Benjamin. 'Cambodia should repair Asean fissures and plan for credible summit'. The Straits Times. 14 August 2012

[66] 'Cambodian PM meets Chinese FM on bilateral ties'. Xinhua News, 10 July 2012.

[67] Ho, Benjamin & Supriyanto, Ristian Atriandi. 'ASEAN buffeted by choppy China waters'. The Global Times. 3 August 2012

[68] Acharya, Amitav, Regionalism and Multilateralism: Essays on Cooperative Security in the Asia-Pacific (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2002). p. 201

[69] Ibid, p.202

foreign affairs." [70] As Ba observed with reference to China's presence in Southeast Asia, "The 1990s ended on a different note than the one on which it began. In particular, ASEAN–China relations experienced a dramatic increase in exchanges involving new economic opportunities, new functional cooperation, a new Chinese foreign policy, new economic initiatives, and changing attitudes on both sides. Indeed, what has taken place is no less than a major sea change in relations." [71]

Seen from this vantage point, it would appear that the rise of China as a major regional power bodes well for ASEAN. Such a view, however, is not widely shared among ASEAN policy-making circles, with some analysts speaking of the likely emergence of a Chinese sphere of influence in Southeast Asia, such as a 'center-periphery relationship'. [72] As Acharya points out, despite the desire by ASEAN to "cultivate Beijing [as an economic partner]…the core ASEAN countries are unlikely to bandwagon collectively *with* China…at present, ASEAN is not without bargaining power in its dealings with China [for] China needs ASEAN's acquiescence and cooperation to realize its leadership ambitions in Asia and the world". [73] More recently, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Fu Ying professed that relations with ASEAN were of "unquestionable priority" for China and that China would continue to support ASEAN's "centrality" in East Asian cooperation. Urging ASEAN not to be a bystander or "a tool of major powers" to cope with the new challenges in the current global political and economic atmosphere, Fu added that "ASEAN should exercise its independent judgment to move this region forward. If ASEAN takes sides, it would lose its relevance."[74]

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[70] Hugh White and Brendan Taylor. 'A rising China and American perturbations.' in William Tow. ed., Security Politics in the Asia-Pacific: A Regional-Global nexus? (Cambridge University Press, 2009) p.94

[71] Alice Ba. 'Southeast Asia and China', in Evelyn Goh, ed., Betwixt and Between: Southeast Asian Strategic Relations with the US and China, IDSS Monograph No. 7. (Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2005) pp. 93-108,

[72] S.D. Muni, China's Strategic Engagement with the New ASEAN. IDSS Monograph No. 2. (Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2002) pp. 21, 132

[73] Acharya, Amitav, Regionalism and Multilateralism: Essays on Cooperative Security in the Asia-Pacific (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2002). p. 226

[74] Suthichai Yoon. 'Chinese Minister: ASEAN can shape power play in E.Asia', The Nation, 26 Jun 2012.

ASEAN Centrality and the Way Forward

As the above discussion highlights, ASEAN is not without its own bargaining chips as far as attempts to straddle the interests of both the United States and China are concerned. It is noted that while the ASEAN community would like to cultivate a strong U.S. stake in the region, they prefer not to take "precautionary steps that might inadvertently or prematurely signal hostile intent toward China". [75] For this reason, the Philippines turned down the Clinton administration proposals to pre-position war materials for regional contingencies, yet continues to welcome joint military exercises and other defense cooperation with the United States.[76] Indeed, by emphasizing the centrality of ASEAN in the course of engaging with the US and China, individual ASEAN states are able to draw upon a wider community of ideational and material resources with which to engage and legitimize their interests and positions vis-à-vis those of the big powers. Indeed, as Acharya observes, even if ASEAN's great-power suitors are motivated by a competitive economic logic, this is hardly an evil in itself as "free trade and investment…can have pacific consequences, intended and unintended.[77] Furthermore, it also reinforces the role that ASEAN plays in contributing to the regional peace and developmental order. For instance, top governments leaders and academics have cited the political reforms instituted by Myanmar as a result of sustained ASEAN political coercion and engagement. [78]

Nevertheless, it would be risky – even dangerous – to overstate the extent and rolewhich ASEAN plays within the broader regional political community. This is particularly so if ASEAN states – in their proclivity to avoid being drawn into big power rivalries – end up adopting an inward-looking, it-is-all-about-ASEAN mentality" in their global interactions. Paradoxically speaking, ASEAN's ascension to global prominence came about as a result of

[75] Douglas H. Paal. 'China and the East Asian Security Environment: Complementarity and Competition.' in Ezra F. Vogel. ed., Living with China: U.S. – China Relations in the Twenty-first Century (NY: W.W. Norton & Co, 1997) pp. 98-99

[76] Ibid

[77] Amitav Acharya. 'An opportunity not to be squandered', The Straits Times, November 12, 2002.

[78] Najib Razak. 'The Asean Way won Burma Over', Wall Street Journal, Apr 3, 2012; Roger Mitton, 'Nargis was a Turning Point', The Myanmar Times, Vol 31, No. 614; Balbir B. Bhasin, 'ASEAN shows the way as Myanmar opens', Asia Times Online, May 18, 2012

ASEAN nations' willingness to open themselves up to the wider global community of nations. In other words, *ASEAN centrality was made possible because individual ASEAN countries chose to align their fortunes with the rest of the world, and in doing so, brought about the collective success of the ASEAN community*. In light of the increasingly complex and multifaceted nature of global challenges, the tendency and temptation for ASEAN to look inwards and close in on herself will grow. Anxieties over big power relations and the uncertainties of how these interactions will play out could lead ASEAN member states to possibly disengage from global challenges and instead, develop overly parochial and isolationist tendencies. Such an outcome, if it happens, will be unfortunate for ASEAN, and would paralyze the region whose very growth was founded upon its diverse and dynamic relationships its member states have with the wider world. Likewise, it can be argued that any formulation of an ASEAN security-economic community without the involvement and commitment of the great powers would be an equally unrealistic expectation.[79]

A more circumspect assessment of the future of ASEAN centrality in its dealings with global powers would be to first recognize the limitations of ASEAN's efforts at major power institutionalization.. The fact that "major powers are not of one mind as to how a process should work or what purposes they should primarily serve" also raises the difficulty of recognizing what ASEAN's collective interests are and how to reconcile them with the political objectives of the major powers. [80] Furthermore, the fact that major powers are interacting with one another also "mitigates the effects of [ASEAN-led] institutional processes and practices. [81] In light of America's projected pivot to Asia and the perceived expansion of Chinese power, I argue *that the interests of ASEAN states would be better served in expanding their relational capacities (whether formally or informally) vis-à-vis other regional and global partners instead of over-emphasizing the centrality of ASEAN*. Indeed, it is argued that current designs for effective multilateralism have not quite worked out as the major powers in the Asia-Pacific have thus far been unwilling to allow multilateral

[79] Tang Siew Mun. 'No Community Sans Concert?' in Tan See Seng, ed., Do Institutions Matter? Regional Institutions and Regionalism in East Asia. (RSIS Monograph No. 13, 2008) p. 65

[80] Ba, Alice. 'ASEAN centrality imperiled?' in Ralf Emmers, ed., ASEAN and the Institutionalization of East Asia. (London: Routledge, 2012) p. 130

[81] Ibid.

institutions to manage their core security interests.[82] For instance, it has been highlighted that the United States has shifted the EAS' agenda focus to discuss political and security issues in traditional security areas like the South China Sea disputes, de-nuclearization of North Korea and the Six-Party talks, instead of the original EAS agenda which focused on economic cooperation and integration, functional cooperation, and non-security issues.[83] Likewise, the fact that China prefers a bilateral approach to resolving the South China Sea disputes, which it has since identified as a core interest alongside Taiwan, Tibet, Taiwan and Xinjiang[84], also raises the difficulty of obtaining any multilateral consensus among the ASEAN community, let alone for ASEAN centrality to be preserved. As major powers are not likely to acquiesce to a diminution of their interests, a more realistic strategy would be for the ASEAN community to provide "contextualized framing" of the issues it chooses to engage instead of attempting to be the lead "driver" in all matters of regional concern. While the ASEAN community still represents the "best candidate for adjudicating and synthesizing the [great powers'] approaches to regional security order-building", much will ultimately still depend on the great powers' "willingness to cooperate more than compete and on their joint propensity to tolerate initial affronts to their own security policies." [85]

With many of the major powers undergoing leadership changes this year (2012), this is a good opportunity for the ASEAN community to rethink and reformulate its strategy vis-à-vis the rest of the world. This does not necessarily mean a common ASEAN position on every issue needs to be solicited; on the contrary, the greater the plurality and diversity of views, the greater the capacity for ASEAN to intercede and influence matters of regional concerns. This would also require ASEAN to seek the constructive involvement of outside actors and channel their resources for the benefit of the region. As Acharya rightly observes,

[82] Cook, M., Heinrich, R., Medcalf, R. and Shearer, A. Power and Choice: Asian security futures (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2010) p. 78

[83] Tan Seng Chye. 'Changing Global Landscape and Enhanced US Engagement with Asia – Challenges and Emerging Trends, Asia-Pacific Review, 2012, 19:1, pp. 108-129

[84] Edward Wong, 'Chinese Military Seems to Extend Its Naval Power', New York Times, 23 Apr 2010

[85] William T. Tow. 'Great powers and multilateralism.' in Ralf Emmers, ed., ASEAN and the Institutionalization of East Asia. (London: Routledge, 2012) pp. 165-166

"ASEAN works best by pooling sovereignty, rather than diluting it." [86]All these, however, must not come at the expense of an honest willingness to be "flexibly engaged" – as Surin Pitsuwan, the current ASEAN secretary-general, states.[87] Moving forward, this would mean the articulation of difficult – and politically sensitive – topics that may challenge the ASEAN Way of diplomatic wrangling. Likewise, given the changing global dynamics, what sort of community ASEAN member countries intend to construct for Southeast Asia will also have to be clarified.[88] To what extent a robust ASEAN community can be formed will be a critical test of ASEAN's readiness – and relevance – as a regional stakeholder.

[86] Amitav Acharya. 'Strengthening ASEAN as a Security Community', The Jakarta Post, June 14, 2003.

[87] Surin Pitsuwan. 'The Return of Flexible Engagement'. In Amitav Acharya, Asia Rising: Who is Leading? (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2008) pp. 131-134.

[88] See Seng Tan. 'Southeast Asian Perspectives on the Regional Security Order: Southeast Asia in Search of Security Community: Can ASEAN Go Beyond Crisis, Consequentiality and Conceptual Convenience. Paper presented by 26th Asia-Pacific Roundtable, 28-30 May 2012, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

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