

ASEAN: Going It Alone? Not Quite

Written by See Seng Tan

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At an international forum in Shanghai in May 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping called for Asian security issues to be handled by Asians. While few made the connection at the time, Xi's appeal brings to mind the Indonesian mantra, long held, of 'regional solutions for regional problems' (Leifer, 2000). The notion that Southeast Asians are best placed to manage their own challenges has long captivated the regional imagination and, together with the Cold War concern against interference in Southeast Asia by outside powers, has served as a basis for treaties of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) such as the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality, and the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone.

On the other hand, the facts on the ground underscore the gap between aspiration and reality in Southeast Asia. Despite a nearly five-decade-long exercise in confidence-building – ASEAN was established in 1967 – mutual distrust among ASEAN member states has remained high, limiting the extent and depth of intraregional cooperation. Most recently, the apparent failure by the relevant ASEAN countries to share information they might have held concerning the Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 that went missing presumably reflected persistent worries among them about revealing the extent of their respective surveillance capabilities – or lack of – to one another (Lloyd, 2014). Be that as it may, analysts have also identified the relative paucity among ASEAN states, with the exception of Singapore, of national assets and resources which could be deployed in the event of transnational crises that affect the region.

To be sure, ASEAN states have historically cooperated among themselves, successfully so, on political and security issues such as counterterrorism, maritime security, and conflict management more broadly (Tan, 2009a). The rare skirmish aside, ASEAN can rightly take pride that hitherto, no major war has broken out among its member countries. However, while the Association is not without formal instruments for conflict prevention and management – the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia and its High Council and, more ambitiously, the ASEAN Charter and its dispute settlement mechanism – there have been few occasions, almost none, where its member countries actually appropriated those provisions to manage, much less resolve, their mutual disputes. Indeed, that the Association's attempt to establish a political-security community among its member nations is proceeding at a considerably slower pace than its concomitant effort to form an economic community – whose progress has been hampered by behind-the-border barriers – implies that ASEAN's own vision of security integration will unlikely be realized for some time, much less by its self-declared deadline of 2015 (Kyodo News International, 2013).

To the extent they have sought to handle problems they have with each other through bilateral means, ASEAN states, hewing to the 'ASEAN Way' of consensus and consultation, have relied on informal measures (Acharya, 1997). The good office of the chairmanship of ASEAN, which rotates annually among member states, has been used on occasion for the purpose of mediation; an illustration is the effort by Indonesia, in its prerogative as ASEAN chair, to craft a modus vivendi to deal with the border crisis between Cambodia and Thailand in 2011. (Indonesia also exercised its de facto leadership in the Association to cobble together the so-called 'six point agreement' in the wake of the ASEAN foreign ministers' failure to produce a joint communiqué – the first time ever in its history – at their meeting in Phnom Penh in July 2012.) On their own, a number of ASEAN states have participated in peace support operations in Southeast Asia under the United Nations and other international auspices, and contributed to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) missions in the region (Caballero-Anthony and Acharya, 2005). However, such efforts have neither involved the use of ASEAN's formal instruments nor been conducted under the

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ASEAN aegis.

Rather than managing their mutual disputes on an intramural basis, the preference of ASEAN countries has been to look elsewhere for help. Hitherto, those who agreed to submit their joint territorial disputes to third-party arbitration have turned to the International Court of Justice, as did Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore over their respective islands disputes with each other. The unilateral decision by the Philippines to bring its dispute with China over Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea before the Hamburg-based International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea underscored the Association's evident disunity and weakness in the face of Chinese assertiveness. ASEAN countries likewise have relied on the World Trade Organization's dispute settlement mechanism to handle their trade disputes; the first dispute ever submitted to the WTO when its dispute mechanism became operational in 1995 involved two ASEAN states, Malaysia and Singapore.

ASEAN has in fact institutionalized and deepened its dependence on outside powers through its dialogue partner arrangements and the complex of regional institutions which it carries or had a hand in forming. Institutions such as the APEC, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the East Asia Summit reflect not only ASEAN's preference for open regionalism, but, in a sense, are a tacit admission of Southeast Asians' inability to manage their growing host of complex challenges on their own (Tan, 2009b). In the case of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus process, for instance, ASEAN countries look to eight dialogue partners (America, Australia, China, India, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, and Russia) for assistance to develop their national and regional capacities in HADR, nuclear counter-proliferation, ensuring safety and security in the maritime domain, counterterrorism, and the like (Tan, 2012). Even then, despite the enhanced focus paid to the development of ASEAN's capabilities in HADR, the organization's relative inaction in response to Typhoon Haiyan which struck the Philippines in November 2013 – individual ASEAN states did respond on their own, however, though nowhere near what America and Britain contributed – only served to underscore the extent and depth of their dependence (Graham, 2013).

Needless to say, reliance on outside powers entails its own challenges, particularly in the present age of rising strategic rivalry between China and the United States, and the polarizing effect that has had on ASEAN. Chinese assertiveness and American rebalancing has made it more difficult for ASEAN countries to hedge against and engage with all outside powers. Growing frustration among non-ASEAN stakeholders in ASEAN-led institutions over the Association's perceived ineffectiveness as a regional leader has led many to question the wisdom of ASEAN's centrality in the regional architecture in Asia (Acharya, 2012). While such dynamics have no doubt complicated and strained the Association's dependence on outside powers, ASEAN states, for the reasons highlighted above, are however more likely than not to keep looking outward than in.

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