

Student Feature – Spotlight on ASEAN

Written by Robert Yates

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ROBERT YATES, JUL 27 2019

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a regional organisation composed of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines, Brunei, Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos (Timor Leste is expected to join in the near future). It is widely seen as one of the most successful forms of regionalism, having survived major geopolitical and economic transformations over its five decades. ASEAN has developed a dense network of interactions across multiple spheres and issue areas, hosting hundreds of meetings a year including high profile summits with all Asia's major powers. Within IR, a contentious debate has arisen over ASEAN's effectiveness both in advancing integration between its members and in shaping relations between the great powers. The latter debate has focused on whether ASEAN has any role to play in ameliorating tensions between the United States and China and building a stable regional order. In this feature I will provide a short overview of ASEAN's historical development, its institutional features and then discuss the IR debate between sceptics and proponents of ASEAN.

Historical development

Throughout its history ASEAN has been a conservative and reactionary form of regionalism. It has sought to conserve an autonomous space for regional governments against unwanted interference from external powers. This means ASEAN's key institutional developments have come as responses to changes in the geopolitical and geoeconomic environment rather than being driven by any shared vision of an integrated Southeast Asia.

ASEAN was created in 1967 by the governments of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines. They were bound together by their common anti-communist orientation, their ascendance to power through the crushing of leftist opposition movements with the support of the United States or Britain, as well as their shared sense of vulnerability in the face of potential great power withdrawal from the region.

In previous years, despite efforts such as the Association of Southeast Asia (1961-1967) and MAPHILINDO (1963), regional cooperation between these states had been hindered by the radical nationalism of Indonesia's Sukarno government. Sukarno opposed Western influence in the region and pursued military confrontation against Malaysia and Singapore because of their strong links to Britain. In 1966 Sukarno was deposed by Suharto's military regime amidst mass killings of suspected communists. Suharto ended the confrontation against neighbouring states and sought Indonesia's reintegration into the global economy. ASEAN therefore served as a vehicle for reconciliation between the ruling elites of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, as well as a means to tie Indonesia's leadership ambitions to a regional framework. All ASEAN states supported the US military effort in Vietnam and the US was pleased to see regional allies cooperating with each other.

A few years after its creation ASEAN articulated its desire for a more neutral and autonomous Southeast Asia in the 1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) declaration. This was a response to the Sino-US rapprochement and reflected concern amongst ruling elites that this might allow China more influence over Southeast Asian affairs. ASEAN members were, however, happy for the US military presence to remain.

The next major turning point in ASEAN's development came in response to the communist victories in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in 1975. ASEAN hosted its first summit meeting in 1976 where it established a secretariat and signed its first treaty, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which set out its foundational norms including the norm of

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non-interference. The ASEAN governments hoped the TAC could provide a basis for reconciliation with the communist states on the mainland, but Vietnam viewed ASEAN claims to autonomy and neutralism as baseless considering the strong military ties ASEAN states maintained with Western powers.

The geopolitical environment changed again in late 1978 when Vietnam invaded and occupied Cambodia, ousting the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge (KR). ASEAN provided diplomatic leadership in the UN, denouncing Vietnam's actions, whilst China supported the KR's guerilla military campaign against the Vietnamese. ASEAN's diplomatic activism on this issue throughout the 1980s raised its profile considerably and gave it a new role as a collective representative of its members in wider international society.

The resolution of the Cambodian conflict in 1991 and the end of the Cold War provided another major geopolitical shift. At the same time the breakdown of GATT negotiations and emergence of regional trade agreements such as NAFTA added complex geoeconomic dimensions. These raised concerns about ASEAN's relevance in the post-Cold War era. ASEAN responded by seeking to beef up its Secretariat, signing the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) agreement and establishing a role as a driver of Asia-Pacific regionalism through spearheading the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), a security dialogue including all major regional powers and players. The mainland Southeast Asian states also joined ASEAN in the 1990s.

ASEAN was rocked again by the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, receiving criticism for its inability to address the crisis. The ASEAN states responded by enhancing economic cooperation with China, Japan and South Korea through the ASEAN Plus Three. This new layer of regional cooperation that did not include the United States was driven by a common feeling amongst East Asian states that the US was seeking to exploit the financial crisis and force regional states to implement liberalisation measures.

However, as East Asian regionalism advanced, ASEAN governments were concerned that ASEAN would again lose its relevance and be swallowed up by the larger grouping. Under Indonesia's chairmanship in 2003, ASEAN agreed to create an ASEAN Community with three pillars: Economic, Political-Security, and Socio-Cultural. This reformist drive also included the development of the ASEAN Charter in 2007, setting out ASEAN's legal status and formalising its purposes and principles. ASEAN also responded to criticism from civil society groups that it was a club for elites who ignored human rights. ASEAN rhetoric shifted to emphasise a 'people-centred' ASEAN, through which it provided forums for civil society participation such as the ASEAN Peoples' Forum. ASEAN also developed a human rights body and a declaration on human rights. Critics, however, have pointed out that ASEAN's inclusion of civil society groups represents an effort to manage dissent rather than a substantive democratisation of ASEAN processes.

Despite challenges to ASEAN's role as a driver of Asia's regional cooperation, ASEAN managed to establish the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005 and expand it to include the United States and Russia by 2011. It is widely recognised as the premier leadership summit in the Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific region. All members of the EAS have signed the TAC, acknowledging the value of ASEAN's norms.

Institutional features

Due to its nature as a conservative form of regionalism, ASEAN lacks the kind of supranational institutions and authoritative bodies that we see in the European Union. The agenda and initiative for ASEAN cooperation is largely driven by the chair which rotates each year between member states based on alphabetical order (currently Thailand). The ASEAN Secretariat and office of the Secretary-General based in Jakarta perform a supportive role and are overseen by the Committee of Permanent Representatives, made up of Ambassador-level officials from each member state. ASEAN has traditionally been characterised by an informal and consensus-driven approach to regional cooperation, which contrasts with the legal-rational style of institutionalisation preferred by Western-dominated institutions. This has not prevented ASEAN agreeing to ambitious goals and targets such as the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025. It has, however, meant that implementation of such agreements has been uneven, and that ASEAN lacks compliance and dispute settlement mechanisms. The gap between ASEAN's stated goals and implementation has been explained as reflecting the ongoing contest between neo-liberal minded

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reformists across the region, who are keen to strengthen regional governance, and the entrenched nationally-focused coalitions that have underpinned regional states' neo-mercantilist approach to development.

The ASEAN debate in IR

The IR debate on ASEAN can be characterised as pitting sceptics against proponents. The way scholars evaluate ASEAN reflects their theoretical assumptions regarding the criteria by which regional cooperation should be judged. ASEAN sceptics tend to come from a realist tradition and therefore consider material capabilities and the balance of power between great powers as the most determinative factors shaping regional security. For them, ASEAN can only be useful as far as its aims and strategies align with great power interests. ASEAN therefore does not perform a significant role in shaping great power relations, especially with respect to traditional or high security issues such as the South China Sea dispute. ASEAN may only be useful for facilitating low-level cooperation on non-traditional security issues. Likewise, the reluctance of ASEAN members to cede any authority to ASEAN institutions represents for realists the primacy of national interests in the region, limiting ASEAN's effectiveness at ensuring its members' compliance with agreements and declarations.

ASEAN proponents tend to be elite practitioners who have been closely involved with ASEAN, for example Kishore Mahbubani (below) or IR scholars with constructivist leanings. Both place importance on ASEAN's process of informal dialogue and consensus-building as enabling cooperation and peace-building between diverse and formerly antagonistic states. IR constructivists have also argued that ASEAN has created a distinct diplomatic culture and norms which it has had some success socialising the great powers into adopting.

My own take is somewhere in between, seeing ASEAN as performing a recognised role in guiding large scale efforts at cooperative security, but doing so within a negotiated division of labour with the great powers over the management of regional order. This division of labour holds for now but will become increasingly strained as the US and China's visions for regional order under their own leadership further diverge.

About the author:

Robert Yates is Lecturer in Politics at the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies (SPAIS), University of Bristol. He researches states' social roles in regional order management in the Asia-Pacific. His recent book *Understanding ASEAN's Role in Asia-Pacific Order* (2019, Palgrave Macmillan) explores the historical negotiation and development of ASEAN's role in shaping and managing order in Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific, from the early years of the Cold War to the present day.