



The Asia Foundation



CAMBODIA'S CHAIRMANSHIP OF ASEAN

*CHALLENGING PERCEPTIONS,
CONCRETIZING CONSOLIDATIONS*



NOVEMBER 2021

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**CAMBODIA'S CHAIRMANSHIP
OF ASEAN:**
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PICH Charadine*

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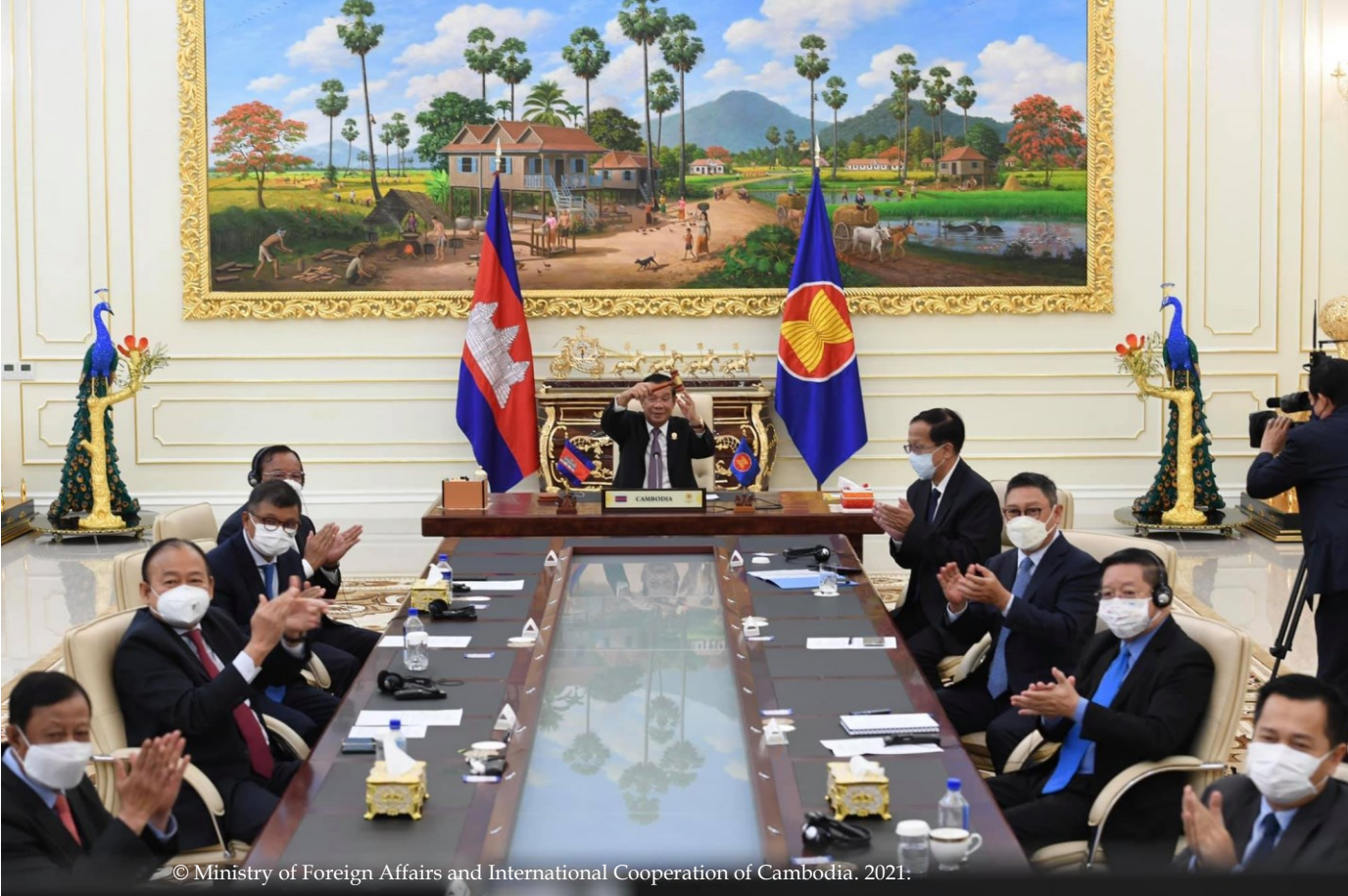
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Next year will mark the 55th anniversary of ASEAN's establishment. Born out of a need to safeguard the region from the Cold War superpowers' competing ideological spheres of influence, ASEAN has transformed the Southeast Asian region from a conflicted arena of political insecurity and economic disadvantage to a new region of astonishing political stability and prosperity. The grouping has been part of the wider 'Asian Miracle' of which external partners are eyeing to play some major roles. At the same time, however, ASEAN faces various internal setbacks, enduring challenges, and future uncertainties. Recently, ASEAN's relevance and unity (or the lack thereof) has been questioned frequently, with critics citing both internal and external factors.

As the upcoming Chair of ASEAN in 2022 for the third time, Cambodia will handle an important task during a highly critical time. In this respect, my institute, the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP), is particularly pleased to be able to undertake a major book project on the theme: *"Cambodia's Chairmanship of ASEAN: Challenging Perceptions, Concretizing Consolidations"*. This has given us the chance to take stock of the prospective opportunities, be mindful of hindering challenges, and think about how to navigate external partners within ASEAN and beyond. It is also with the hope that the book would serve as a 'guideline' or even 'handbook' for relevant and interested stakeholders, including policymakers, the diplomatic community, academia, and the general public alike, to grasp 1) the essence of ASEAN Centrality amidst geopolitical contestation, 2) the significance of cooperation under the three pillars of ASEAN, and, among others, 3) the importance of public diplomacy in the wider ASEAN context.

On behalf of CICP, I wish to express our sincere appreciation to Ms. Meloney Lindberg, Country Representative of The Asia Foundation in Cambodia, and her good office for the extended generous support in making this book project possible. I wish to also congratulate my Deputy Director, Ms. Pich Charadine, and her editorial team including Jack Carter, who was our Visiting Research Fellow from the UK, for their diligent work in making this project such a comprehensive piece. In addition, this book would not have been feasible without the invaluable contributions from all the authors, friends, and colleagues whose perspectives have shed new light on ASEAN affairs in various aspects. We hold a strong conviction that the compilation of diverse views and ideas in



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this publication will trigger a positive reaction and stimulate more substantial deliberation among scholarly, academic, as well as the diplomatic communities. This will ultimately serve as a basis for elevating Cambodia's image as the incoming chair of ASEAN to new heights.

Last but not least, we wish to also express our utmost gratitude for the Special Foreword message by **H.E. Mrs. Eat Sophea**, Secretary of State and ASEAN SOM Leader of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, for her kind support and continuous encouragement to the work of CICP and our contributions to Track 1.5 dialogue and Track 2 deliberations.

Ambassador Pou Sothirak

Executive Director

Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace

SPECIAL FOREWORD

After more than five decades of existence, ASEAN has evolved into one of the front-runners of effective multilateralism based on the ASEAN Way, ASEAN centrality and unity in diversity. ASEAN has been making great strides in its endeavor to build a people-centered and people-oriented ASEAN Community with One Vision, One Identity, One Community. As a proud member of this thriving regional community, Cambodia is honored to assume the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022, the third time since joining ASEAN on 30 April 1999.

This book entitled **“Cambodia’s Chairmanship of ASEAN: Challenging Perceptions, Concretizing Consolidations”**, could not have come at a better time. The interest on what should be Cambodia’s priorities for ASEAN is growing, as 2022 is fast approaching. People wish to revisit facts and views on Cambodia’s contribution to ASEAN in the last two decades. They want to assess the geopolitical and socio-economic context under which Cambodia will navigate the ASEAN process to maintain the grouping’s relevance and credibility as a driving force for regional peace, stability and growth.

The publication of this book by the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP) is not only timely, but also very relevant both as a point of reference to guide deeper thoughts and as an informative piece of work to enhance understanding on ASEAN. I have no doubt in the commitment of the CICP to offer its vast pool of readers a comprehensive and well-balanced picture of Cambodia’s foreign policy, the country’s share of triumph, trials and tribulations as part of the ASEAN family, and ASEAN’s political-security, economic and socio-cultural dynamics.



ASEAN
CAMBODIA 2022



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In taking the torch of ASEAN Chairmanship for 2022, Cambodia resolves to bring about further progress towards building a harmonious ASEAN community that is peaceful, stable, and prosperous, underpinning engagement with the wider region. Cambodia will strive to strengthen ASEAN centrality and unity in fairly managing all issues placed on ASEAN table and hopes to see all the peoples in the region emerge more resilient from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am confident that this book will stimulate constructive discussions and ideas on issues pertinent to our region and our ASEAN family's welfare.

H.E. Mrs. EAT Sophea

Secretary of State

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

ASEAN SOM Leader of Cambodia





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ASEAN CENTRALITY AMIDST STRATEGIC GEOPOLITICAL POWER CONTESTATION

Ambassador Pou Sothirak*

**Ambassador Pou Sothirak has been holding a position as Executive Director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP) since June 2013. He also serves as Advisor to the Royal Government of Cambodia since February 2014. He was appointed as Secretary of State of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia from September 2013 to January 2014. He was Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore from January 2009 to December 2012. He was appointed as Cambodian Ambassador to Japan from April 2005 to November 2008. He served as elected Cambodian Member of Parliament twice during the general election in 1993 and 2003. He was appointed as Minister of Industry Mines and Energy of the Royal Government of Cambodia from 1993 to 1998. He has written extensively on various issues confronting the development of Cambodia and the region.*

Introduction

The evolving regional and global security landscape requires the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to remain vigilant, creative, and bold in order to manage challenges and address issues that stand in the 'ASEAN Way' in improving its relevance and securing its interests in the longer term, while also dealing with the challenges and the dynamics of regional and global developments. As ASEAN moves ahead into the first half of the twenty-first century, there are a few areas of diplomatic contestations which must be confronted and concretely addressed to ensure ASEAN's continued relevance, viability, and vitality in the future.

From the time of its initial inception in 1967 until full membership of all ten Southeast Asian countries in 1999, ASEAN has evolved in stages, step-by-step, on the basis of consensus, non-interference, and at a pace comfortable to every member state. The hallmark "ASEAN Charter" was adopted only in 2008 and the ASEAN Community came into being in 2016 with the adoption of the new "Vision 2025". They were designed to help navigate the region through critical situations, including strategic threats, political instability, economic stagnation, uncertainty from increasing great power competition and more recently, the seemingly relentless COVID-19 pandemic. Moving forward, the regional grouping must constantly remind its 10 member states to remain united or else suffer interference by external powers whose strategic ambitions may undermine "ASEAN Centrality" (hereafter referred to as AC), affect its traditional *modus operandi* and reduce its fundamental cohesion.

Currently, it is fair to say that AC is well respected by others. But there are scholars who have highlighted the inadequacies of existing ASEAN mechanisms, called for a revamp of various frameworks and questioned the viability of the new ones, such as the ASEAN Outlook for the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Thus, it appears as though ASEAN needs an introspection in regard to its centrality. This would help to identify whether the grouping is still in the driver seat in terms of possessing what is required to exhibit robust leadership and the capacity to effectively steer East-Asian international relations.

As the world prepares to enter a post COVID-19 period, coupled with the intensification of US and China antagonism, AC continues to face ongoing challenges. This chapter will first attempt to give a new meaning to AC by focusing on a major challenge currently confronting the region, namely the hegemonic contestation between the two most powerful states, and how this has

adversely affected ASEAN relevance. Secondly, the paper offers some suggestions on how to revitalize AC amid relentless geopolitical rivalry. To conclude, it suggests that unless AC can be maintained, the region will remain in flux and ever more susceptible to the unyielding influence of external powers.

ASEAN Centrality in a Renewed Setting of the US-China Competition

It is indisputable that ASEAN has achieved a lot since its inception in 1967. However, the regional grouping has had its fair share of both successes and setbacks along the way.

One of the greatest success stories for ASEAN has been its ability to preserve the region as a zone of peace, stability and prosperity, with no major rupture in inter-state relations nor an armed conflict between members since the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia over 30 years ago. During the past 50 years, ASEAN has played a central role in creating numerous opportunities to rectify shortcomings and strengthen the prospect of a truly peaceful, stable and prosperous future for the Asia-Pacific region. Most notable among the opportunities created has been the development of various instruments and mechanisms to enable regional cooperation and strengthen AC in terms of engaging with the rest of the world.

However, external geopolitical developments are making it difficult for the bloc to make progress on further integration toward ASEAN regionalism. The so-called 'ASEAN Way' and its tenet of centrality have yet to prove their effectiveness.

The ASEAN identity remains relatively weak given the ongoing nationalistic sentiments among certain member states. This constitutes a significant barrier in regard to achieving the ASEAN Political Security Community pillar. ASEAN still lacks effective collective leadership and a common voice on the political sphere, especially in terms of hard security issues.

One of the biggest challenges to ASEAN is how to prioritize regional interests over those of individual countries' national interests. This is a very hard outcome to achieve, owing to the diverse nature of ASEAN. Individual ASEAN states, for instance, may opt out of the imperatives of their national interest, be more inclined to lean toward one major power or another.

The idea of a unified 'ASEAN Way' has thus become increasingly irrelevant in recent years. Efforts to revitalize it are urgently needed and an internal review of the ASEAN Charter is, in fact, long overdue. For ASEAN to gain more influence and command greater respect from external partners around the world, member states must act together to improve the grouping's *modus operandi*. This would likely involve swiftly addressing persisting challenges related to forging greater regional integration and managing growing external geopolitical rivalries and security dynamics in the region which in turn adversely affect common regional interests.

At 53 years of age, ASEAN as an institution should know which issues infringe upon "ASEAN centrality". Yet this notion remains something of a myth and suffers from under-development both in conceptualization and in practice. The term, which is often used to enforce ASEAN's position as "sitting in the driver seat" of all established mechanisms, also needs to be re-clarified and explained from time to time. This would give ASEAN greater credibility when engaging with dialogue partners and also proven itself to be relevant, resilient, flexible, pragmatic and a credible force that can maintain peace, security and progress for the region and beyond.

The 'new normal' created by the outbreak of COVID-19 has brought about greater anxiety than the world has ever experienced in the post-Cold War era and intensified broader debates of more dangerous geopolitics in the Asia-Pacific region. The virus has exacerbated the U.S.-China strategic contest over world leadership which has reached new heights in recent times. The danger of an all-out confrontation has become more real than ever. It is rather difficult to see a reality where the U.S. and China will work together to lead the world, given the deep-seated animosities between them. They are more likely to work independently or in conflict to safeguard their respective national interests in the post COVID-19 world. The pandemic has fueled geopolitical friction and exacerbated existing great-power tensions, with the U.S. blaming China for the disease while Beijing uses its charm diplomacy by offering vaccines as public goods to other countries.¹

Discussions on this complex rivalry between the US and China often involve scrutinizing the role of ASEAN and questioning the applicability of AC over the differences between and among major powers in the region. Outside powers remain unconvinced of AC as a significant force that can manage the relations of

¹ See "COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch", International Crisis Group, 24 March 2020. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/sb4-covid-19-and-conflict-seven-trends-watch>

the two most powerful countries in the world. Therefore, it is important to get a better understanding of what exactly AC is about.

So, what exactly is “ASEAN Centrality”?

Let us start with a more nuanced, general perception of how external parties think of AC. Some of them think of it as only a ‘catch phrase,’ one that enforces ASEAN’s ultimate mandate to ‘set the agenda’, to maintain its position as gatekeeper, or to impose an uncompromising position of sitting in the ‘driver’s seat’ at all ASEAN forums.

External partners of ASEAN are not impressed with its tendency to bring different countries and major powers to the discussion only to pay lip service to a myriad of critical issues which are then left hanging in a rhetorical vacuum without substantive follow-up actions. While external observers are not completely unrealistic in their reservation concerning such credibility issues, many agree that AC must be earned through collective effort and a coherent strategy which effectively responds to regional challenges and shapes discourse in a direction that contributes to regional stability and development. Without such a stance, ASEAN’s claim to centrality is eroded and its credibility will be questioned by external powers with strategic interests in the region.²

There are scholars who correctly claim that ASEAN has no ambition to lead Asia-Pacific international relations nor has the capacity to do so.³ They see ASEAN’s impact as being limited due to a lack of strategic vision, diverging priorities among member states, and weak leadership. ASEAN norms, such as consensus and non-interference, have increasingly become less relevant and have turned out to be stumbling blocks in regard to achieving greater internal unity and commanding centrality as these norms have hindered ASEAN’s influence over China’s handling of the South China Sea dispute.⁴

The proponents of ASEAN, on the contrary, see the block as a beacon of light and assert that it has both successfully survived the geopolitical pitfalls of the Cold

² See "The Continuing Erosion of ASEAN Centrality", by Julio S. Amador III. ASEA Focus, 30 March 2021. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ASEANFocus-March-2021.pdf>

³ See "Still in the “Drivers’ Seat”, But for How Long? ASEAN’s Capacity for Leadership in East-Asian International Relations", by Lee Jones, 1 September 2010. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/186810341002900305>

⁴ See "What Is ASEAN?", by Lindsay Maizland and Eleanor Albert, 20 November 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-asean>

War and been able to transform a conflict-ridden and poverty-stricken region in the 1960s into one of the most peaceful and prosperous regions of the world.⁵ They believe that ASEAN is the most successful regional grouping and that it has gradually brought all countries in Southeast Asia together to achieve unity, stability, and peace. The 'ASEAN Way' is thus seen as the key component for Southeast Asia to achieve greater progress, prosperity and peace and cooperation with external partners in the region and the world.⁶

Many scholars subscribe to an understanding of 'ASEAN centrality' as the political will to act in accordance with ASEAN's principles – neutrality, non-interference, and consensus decision-making – to boost ASEAN's capacity for action and to determine suitable security arrangements which lead to the reduction of external tensions and the prevention of outside powers from intruding into member states' internal affairs.

According to Dr. Termsak Chalermpananupap, a veteran observer of ASEAN and a well-known researcher who knows how the regional grouping operates, AC has four basic components, including: (1) ASEAN's external engagements; (2) the ongoing ASEAN community-building endeavor; (3) the institutional framework based on the ASEAN Charter; and (4) the political will, the shared responsibility in ASEAN and a collective commitment of all ten member states to ASEAN in enhancing regional peace, security, and prosperity.⁷

The official version of AC can be found in Article 1, Paragraph 15 of the ASEAN Charter, describing 'Centrality' as the assumption of a proactive role in inter-state relations and cooperation with external partners as part of a regional architecture that is open, transparent, and inclusive. Furthermore, Article 2 Paragraph 2 also prescribes AC as an ASEAN principle in external relations, calling for active, efficient, constructive, non-discriminatory and forward-looking leadership of all dialogue and cooperation processes initiated by ASEAN.

⁵ See "ASEAN: An Unexpected Success Story", by Kishore Mahbubani and Kristen Tang, Spring 2018. <https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/asean-an-unexpected-success-story/>

⁶ See "ASEAN at 50: A Valuable Contribution to Regional Cooperation", by Zhang Yunling, 13 October 2017. <https://www.eria.org/asean50-vol.1-37.zhang-yunling.pdf>

⁷ See "Asean Centrality Beyond 2015: Old Challenges, New Questions" by Dr. Termsak Chalermpananupap published in the CICP outcome report entitled 'Cambodia and ASEAN Managing Opportunities and Challenges beyond 2015'. <https://cicp.org.kh/publications/cambodia-and-asean-managing-opportunity-and-challenges-beyond-2015/>

Whatever preference one has in terms of defining AC, the concept of “centrality” should instead refer to the capabilities of ASEAN to manage and effectively implement all of ASEAN’s principles, guidelines, mechanisms, frameworks, forums, initiatives, or “wish lists”. It is both effective action and a skillful diplomatic balancing act that define AC, not aspirational statements or expressions of concern. Unless all external actors have a clear understanding of exactly what AC means, their participation in ASEAN regional frameworks will likely not be as productive and beneficial to the bloc as they might expect.

Nonetheless, the "ASEAN Way" and AC in particular deserve appreciation for moderating both internal member states and external great power tensions. For instance, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), established in 1994, has promoted a cooperative security concept based on the norms of inclusive dialogue and peaceful dispute settlement. Other ASEAN-led forums, such as the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), East Asian Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+) established in 1997, 2005 and 2010 respectively, have also provided additional forums for discussion on a range of specific issues. This allows member states and external powers to interact in a more open and institutionalized setting, helping to reduce mutual suspicion and trust deficit, and to enhance preventive diplomacy so as to minimize a desire to resolve disputes with the use of force.

ASEAN Centrality in the context of US-China Antagonism

Rules-based order

In recent times, AC has been repeatedly put to test via a multitude of constantly evolving security threats. Chief among them is the intensifying great power competition between the U.S. and China. Deep-rooted differences between these two countries, such as the design of the international system – i.e., between U.S.-led liberalism and Socialism with Chinese characteristics – and the South China Sea dispute may be considered dated issues by some, yet remain highly critical in terms of their ability to undermine AC.

Tensions flared up dramatically during the first high-level meeting between top US and Chinese officials in Anchorage, Alaska, on March 18, 2021. Brushing through the transcript of the meeting,⁸ it is easy to form an impression that the

⁸ See "Secretary Antony J. Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Director Yang and State Councilor Wang at the Top of Their Meeting", Remarks by US Secretary of State, Antony J. Blinken in Anchorage, Alaska on 18 March, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony->

U.S. prefers a so-called “rules-based” order that everyone must follow. Any alternative to such an order is seen as advocating for a more violent and unstable world in which the malicious intentions of zero-sum game and Machiavellian politics prevail. In this regard, the U.S. seems to suggest that China is a core threat to the liberal international order which has been the cornerstone of US hegemony since the end of the Cold War. China is deemed as determined to pull apart this order and bring back the old cliché. In rebuttal to the above, China under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), asserts that it upholds the common values of humanity such as peace, development, fairness, justice and freedom. It is also claimed that Beijing upholds the United Nations-centered international system underpinned by international law, not what is advocated by a small number of countries calling for the so-called “rules-based” international order.

According to the well-known International Relations scholar, Stephen M. Walt, China also wants a rules-based international order. The conflict though arises from a different conceptualization of such an order. The U.S., for example, places a high value on individual liberty and human rights, while China endorses the idea of state sovereignty and non-interference. According to Walt, the issue is not about the U.S.’ preference for a “rules-based” order and China’s alleged lack of interest in it, but rather who writes the rules and which rules apply to what.⁹

Despite the fact that the U.S. has actively used its position as global hegemon since World War II to shape the international order, the election of Donald Trump under his “America First” slogan in 2016 demonstrated the immediate need of a country ready to disengage from the world. In trying to make America great again, the US is now effectively rejecting globalization as a positive force. With its aggressive nationalism and the move towards protectionism, the Trump Administration relinquished its support for the multilateral rules-based order that was once a cornerstone of America’s foreign policy – and a source of its hegemonic influence. This deviation from the rules-based order and multilateralism conflicts with ASEAN’s collective security paradigm and makes multilateral cooperation among big powers more difficult, if not impossible.

However, in an effort to revitalize U.S. credibility and resuscitate the multilateral system, current US President Joe Biden issued an Interim National Security

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⁹ See "China Wants a 'Rules-Based International Order,' Too", Stephen M. Walt, and the Robert and Renée Belfer, 31 March, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/31/china-wants-a-rules-based-international-order-too/>

Guidance in March 2021 to convey his vision for how America will engage with the world.¹⁰ The document explains Biden's foreign policy preference for a rules-based order and claims that China is the only U.S. contender potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to such a system. For the U.S., China's aggressive and coercive behavior undermines the rules and values of an open and stable international system.¹¹ The return to an outward looking foreign policy stance under the new U.S. administration will undoubtedly have consequences for ASEAN and the wider region.

The spectacular rise of China is no less worrisome for ASEAN. With greater confidence and assertiveness, today's China has pursued a distinct political and economic developmental model. Since taking power in 2012, Chinese President Xi Jinping has been relentless in developing his country's economic, diplomatic, and political influence on a global scale, as well as building up its military strength and power projection capabilities. At the 2017 party congress, President Xi said that his country will become a global leader by the middle of the century and amplified policies to accelerate the growth of China's national power in support of its "great rejuvenation" by 2049. This will be done through the use of all instruments of state power, including both economic and military.¹² Security experts have also pointed to evidence suggesting that this rising hegemon has an even more ambitious long-term agenda in regards to achieving the status of a preeminent regional superpower.¹³ When it comes to defending core interests, such as those in the South China Sea, China has been consistent and clear in its preference of bilateral negotiation with specific parties rather than multilateral arrangements such as International Court rulings. In short, China does not feel comfortable with the U.S. concept of a rules-based order or Western values such as democracy and human rights.

¹⁰ See "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance", The White House, March 2021. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>

¹¹ See "The US and the Rules-Based Order: Testing the plan", Ben Scott, the Interpreter, 17 March, 2021. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/us-and-rules-based-order-testing-plan>

¹² See "Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress", China Daily, 18 October, 2017. https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm

¹³ See "China Has Two Paths To Global Domination", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 22 May, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/05/22/china-has-two-paths-to-global-domination-pub-81908>

The debate around U.S.-China competition will likely continue to haunt the concept of AC and impede the viability of ASEAN forums to effectively host great power summits. Although such forums may continue to exist for many years to come, their functional capacity to manage the fundamental differences between the US and China remains dubious at best.

The World after COVID-19

The outbreak of COVID-19 has caused the U.S.-China strategic contest over world leadership to reach new heights. The danger of all out confrontation has now become more real than ever. International relations scholars have predicted that the post-COVID-19 world will be less open, less prosperous, and less free. They have also forecasted the demise of globalization as we know it. Instead, it is believed that the world will move towards a more China-centric model of globalization as countries lose faith in the U.S., following its inadequacies in dealing with and leading the world through the pandemic.¹⁴

The result is that the post-COVID-19 world will most likely be centered around an intensification of the U.S.-China rivalry for greater influence in the Asia-Pacific region. This power contestation will probably entail a stronger and more aggressive China, evident in Beijing's increasingly aggressive policies on Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the South China Sea. According to Beijing, reunification with Taiwan is inevitable and any move toward formal independence would be met with military force.¹⁵

On the other hand, the U.S.-led, multi-layered strategy outlined in the "Pivot to Asia" policy under the Obama administration has been transformed into the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP). This new policy framework is designed to ensure that America remains the pre-eminent global leader and also demonstrates how Washington will not hesitate to counter any perceived challenge to the existing, "rules-based" order. On June 1, 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense released the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report.¹⁶ Deriving

¹⁴ See "How the World Will Look After the Coronavirus Pandemic", a publication of Foreign Policies, dated 20 March 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/20/world-order-after-coronavirus-pandemic/>

¹⁵ See "As China Strengthens Grip on Hong Kong, Taiwan Sees a Threat", Javier C. Hernández and Steven Lee Myers, New York Times, 1 July 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/01/world/asia/taiwan-china-hong-kong.html>

¹⁶ See "Free and Open Indo-Pacific – Advancing a Shared Vision", U.S. Department of Defense, 1 June 2019. <https://media.defense.gov/2019/jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>

from the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy, the report describes how the Pentagon seeks to approach the Asia-Pacific region over the course of the next few years. At the moment, however, exactly how Washington intends to operationalize FOIP remains to be seen. Though, addressing China's assertive behavior in the South China Sea is likely high up on the list of U.S. regional priorities.

With the fear that Beijing would alter the international system born out of the U.S. preponderant position and become the next superpower, the Biden Administration has now signaled its intention to maintain its tough key foreign policies toward an increasingly assertive China which thus set into motion a post-pandemic geopolitical collision course. This inevitably puts ASEAN in an awkward diplomatic position, since it seeks to balance between the U.S. for security, and China for trade and investment. Perhaps a new platform of ASEAN Plus Two, as insinuated by a veteran journalist on regional affairs - Kavi Chongkittavorn, is the way forward. To this end, as ASEAN's Chair next year in 2022, Cambodia should seriously consider endorsing such a platform.

The South China Sea

Given the fact that the U.S.-China strategic rivalry in the Indo-Pacific has been picking up steam in recent times, ASEAN cannot afford to remain complacent in addressing the existing territorial and maritime disputes, particularly the ongoing quest for controlling sea lanes in the South China Sea and resolving existing territorial and maritime disputes among claimants. The negotiation on the Code of Conduct (COC) should resume and the final code should be completed sooner rather than later. This must be achieved however by finding solutions which are credible and acceptable to all stakeholders involved if the long-term viability of the code is to be ensured. South China Sea issues, therefore, will not disappear from ASEAN's agenda in the foreseeable future. They will surely be high on the agenda during Cambodia's 2022 ASEAN Chairmanship. This will require the Chair to employ the necessary diplomatic acumen to secure consensus on diverse views, maintain bloc unity and encourage a speedy adoption of the highly anticipated COC.

Unfortunately for the region, ASEAN has remained divided and therefore less effective in negotiations with China on such issues. On the one hand, China has displayed an aggressive stance by asserting maritime rights and unilaterally building artificial islands in the disputed waters. On the other hand, it is also

keen to adopt a cooperative bilateral approach with Southeast Asian claimant states.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has in the past expressed hope for the COC negotiations to be completed by 2021,¹⁷ Experts now however view such a deadline as highly naive and unrealistic. In the absence of collective ASEAN political will to come together and move the process forward, China continues to re-assert its claim to almost all of the South China Sea, routinely objecting any attempt to settle overlapping claims through international court. At this point, ASEAN must realize that unless it can put forward a united stance on the issue, smaller Southeast Asian nations will likely be left with little bargaining power against a rising China when it comes to its own core geo-strategic interests.

Moreover, the U.S. is increasingly viewing the South China Sea as an arena of strategic competition between itself and China. Additionally, observers are now claiming that China is gaining effective control of the South China Sea, an area of great strategic, political, and economic importance to the United States and its allies.¹⁸ This is despite the fact that previous U.S. administrations regarded virtually all such claims outside China's internationally recognized waters as illegitimate. In line with previous rhetoric, the new U.S. Administration recently released a statement claiming that China continues to coerce Southeast Asian claimant states and threaten freedom of navigation. It goes on to assert that nowhere in the world is the rules-based maritime order under greater threat than the South China Sea.¹⁹ Under new President Joe Biden, the U.S. appears determined to hold Beijing accountable for its actions, demand that it follows the rules and prevent it from becoming the most powerful country in the world.²⁰

At present, ASEAN appears divided and unable to respond to outside calls from countries such as the U.S., Australia and Japan to promote norms of adherence

¹⁷ See "Is ASEAN ready to stand up to China in the South China Sea?", by Lee YingHui, East Asia Forum, 24 July, 2020. <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/07/24/is-asean-ready-to-stand-up-to-china-in-the-south-china-sea/>

¹⁸ See "U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress", Congressional Research Service, July 2021. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42784.pdf>

¹⁹ See "Biden backs Trump rejection of China's South China Sea claim", by Associated Press, 11 July 2021. <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/07/11/biden-south-china-sea-trump-499245>

²⁰ See "US going to hold China 'accountable' in the region; press Beijing to follow rules: Biden", the Economic Times, 26 March, 2021. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/us-going-to-hold-china-accountable-in-the-region-press-beijing-to-follow-rules-biden/articleshow/81703703.cms?from=mdr>

to international law in the South China Sea. This disunity is evident from the fact that ASEAN is unable to persuade China to adhere to the so-called 'rules-based' regional order and to compromise its so-called "nine-dash line" claim in favor of international court rulings.²¹ As a result, after the Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling in July 2016, ASEAN seems to have gone its separate ways on the issue.

Given such a fragmented and non-committal attitude towards formalizing a common political standpoint, ASEAN has been criticized by some scholars that the Association's centrality is slowly being neutralized by a rising China which seeks to advance its geo-strategic and territorial interests at the expense of those of other regional powers.

Going forward, if the bloc seeks greater credibility on the issue of centrality, it needs to firmly endorse and take concrete action towards the establishment of a rules-based regional order that promotes equity, stability and transparent decision-making. It needs to create a cooperative inter-state system that will protect every country from actions that could destabilize regional security and prosperity.

The hope for ASEAN is to be able to shape China's behavior by negotiating an effective binding code deemed acceptable by all stakeholders. This would give greater legitimacy to the concept of AC and also improve China's image by showing it can work constructively with ASEAN. It would also be the strongest guarantee against foreign interference or meddling in the South China Sea, something China has always wanted.

In drafting the COC text, ASEAN and China should be mindful of the limitations of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) and ensure that the COC squarely addresses them. First, the COC should provide more detail and avoid, wherever possible, the kind of ambiguous language that is rather common in the DOC. Second, the COC should embody a set of dispute settlement mechanisms in line with the application of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Third, the COC should have a clear mechanism to ensure compliance and enforcement as a binding provision measure. Lastly, the COC should not only contain more general, overarching rules and principles, but should also have clear cut, detailed procedural

²¹ See "How China is bending the rules in the South China Sea", by Oriana Skylar Mastro, The Interpreter Lowy Institute, 17 February 2021. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/how-china-bending-rules-south-china-sea>

guidelines that offer non-violent solutions for parties during the escalation of a dispute.

How can AC be rejuvenated to temper the US-China rivalry?

ASEAN's capacity to influence great power relations in the Asia-Pacific region depends, to a large extent, on the correct interpretation of what great power relations are. Great power relations are often influenced by the level of uncertainty, mutual suspicion, ambitious jostling for dominance, a prioritization of national interests, and a mixture of conflict and cooperation. These characteristics show that geopolitical animosities are, although not impossible, very difficult to contain.

For AC to maintain credibility, the bloc must persuade the U.S. and China that it is in fact an honest broker seeking to temper geopolitical tensions. The real crux of AC as a way of stabilizing U.S.-China relations ultimately depends on ASEAN's power of persuasion in convincing Washington and Beijing that ASEAN has what it takes to mediate their rivalry. After all, some level of competition between these two great powers can also benefit ASEAN as well.

Given the increasing geo-strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific for the US and China, ASEAN centrality must become a facilitator of cooperation and dialogue rather than competition and conflict. ASEAN should constructively deal with them, both separately and collectively. When engaging with China, the first thing ASEAN should do is communicate that the bloc is fully prepared to welcome Beijing as a global power whose progress is not to be viewed as a potential security threat in the Indo-Pacific. Instead, ASEAN should work together with China to help facilitate the country's ascendancy in the absence of mutual tension, instability, mistrust and disruption to the international system. Most important of all however, ASEAN has to encourage China to abandon its goal of global hegemony in favor of becoming a responsible great power in a stable world order. To do so, ASEAN will have to find ways to make China accept AC as ways to enhance a new development paradigm and further build on its 18 years of strategic partnership to work towards regional cooperation with East Asian characteristics, and build a community of shared future, as announced by Foreign Minister Wang Yi during the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting on June 07, 2021 in Chongqing.²²

²² See "Wang Yi Attends Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Celebration of the 30th Anniversary of Dialogue Relations", Statement by the Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China, 7 June 2021.
https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1882097.shtml

Likewise, when reaching out to the U.S., the first thing ASEAN should do is to let Washington know that the bloc is at the core of U.S. strategic and economic interests and that Southeast Asia welcomes the U.S. presence in this region as a stabilizing force. The bloc should also encourage the U.S. to support the concept of AC by communicating how it could also help to achieve Washington's interests. It could for instance help to resolve regional flashpoints such as cross-strait tension, the South China Sea dispute, the lingering issue of denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula, and future prospect of the international rules-based order with the rise of China and its impact on other regional powers such as Japan and Korea. In addition, it would be wise for ASEAN to further promote the rule of law, democracy, human rights, individual freedom and good governance to entice the U.S. into further helping Southeast Asian countries regarding their physical and human development needs. This can be seen in the recent pledge by the U.S. Secretary of State and ASEAN foreign ministers to continue building a strategic partnership based on human rights, fundamental freedoms, economic prosperity, and strong social ties.²³

When dealing with both powers collectively, ASEAN must promote AC as a driver of peace, stability and prosperity in Southeast Asia. If this cannot be achieved, ASEAN's credibility will remain elusive among external powers. In managing external relations between the U.S. and China, ASEAN must position AC in such a way as to balance them and prevent the region as a whole from taking sides. If unified commitment to this end cannot be achieved, individual ASEAN member states will find that they lack the necessary bargaining power to preserve their strategic autonomy and protect regional interests.

ASEAN should avoid fragmentation when interacting with China while also working hard to keep the U.S. deeply engaged in the region. A strong U.S. presence in the Asia Pacific is likely the most effective way to balance China's growing ambitions and ensure its rise remains peaceful. Furthermore, AC must help inject new ways of looking at existing security issues. This entails the revitalization of various ASEAN platforms working in tandem to reset Beijing-Washington relations and encourage greater mutual cooperation not competition. To do this, ASEAN must both contend with a general sense of U.S. antipathy towards China and find solutions to as yet unsolved regional issues such as that of the South China Sea.

²³ See "Secretary Blinken's Meeting with ASEAN Foreign Ministers and the ASEAN Secretary General", Office of the Office of the Spokesperson of the US Department of State, 13 July 2021. <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-meeting-with-asean-foreign-ministers-and-the-asean-secretary-general/>

Conclusion

ASEAN's greatest achievement thus far has been its ability to promote AC as a cornerstone of an open regionalism based on mutual respect and the promotion of dialogue, practical cooperation and non-coercion in settling disputes. However, for ASEAN to remain in the driving seat and successfully manage the intensifying great power rivalry, the very concept of AC needs to be reformed. In addition to offering a forum for discussion and deliberation, ASEAN must actively promote the emergence of a united political voice and concrete decision-making capabilities on key foreign policy issues.

It is rather difficult though to see a reality in which the U.S. and China work together to lead the world. Instead, given the deep-seated animosities between them, the post-COVID-19 international arena is likely to involve them working independently or even in conflict to further safeguard their own national interests. Tensions between these great powers grew greatly under former US President Donald Trump, but even with a new U.S. administration, Beijing-Washington relations seem to be deteriorating rather than improving.²⁴

ASEAN must engage both powers simultaneously with equal consideration and mindfulness. The successful implementation of AC requires diplomatic agility to prevent the further escalation of tensions between these two great powers. In this sense, AC must be used as a tool to encourage continued and perhaps even greater regional engagement from Washington. To avoid a breakdown in the liberal rules-based order, AC must thus be used to encourage the US to play a delicate balancing act between checking China's growing regional ambitions while not over provoking it in terms of heightened security fears.

In a renewed international setting of U.S.-China power contestation, ASEAN must contend with and respond to the fundamental differences in their ideas, principles, norms, interests and expectations, all of which influence their approach to international politics. This is a formidable task and unless AC is rejuvenated to the point where it may both refute its critics for "lacking teeth" and promote a new era of regional integration with strong, coherent leadership on foreign policy, the region could remain forever at the mercy of external powers such as the US and China.

²⁴ See "U.S.-China relations are 'still deteriorating,' says former U.S. ambassador", Yen Nee Lee, 11 June 2021 <https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/11/us-china-relations-are-still-deteriorating-says-max-baucus.html>



ASEAN Foreign Ministers during the opening ceremony of the ASEAN's 49th Annual Ministerial Meeting in Vientiane on July 24, 2016. Photo: AFP © Today Online

TOWARDS CAMBODIA'S ACCESSION TO ASEAN AND 23 YEARS ON: CHALLENGES, PROSPECTS, AND ITS MANEUVERABILITY

Pich Charadine*

** PICH Charadine is the Deputy Executive Director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP) in charge of Research, Training and Publication and concurrently serving as the Coordinator of the Global Center for Mekong Studies (GCMS-Cambodia Center, an official Track II think tank network of Lancang-Mekong Cooperation). She was nominated to the 2019 U.S. Department of State's International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) on ASEAN-Nations of the South China Sea – Sovereignty and Rules-based Order, Visiting Fellow at the China Institute for International Studies (CIIS) in 2018, and Visiting Scholar at China Foreign Affairs University (CFAU) in 2019. She has written and extensively on Sino-Cambodia relations, ASEAN regional framework and ASEAN-China partnership, Cambodia's politics and foreign relations, and Mekong sub-regional cooperation, especially on Mekong-Lancang Cooperation.*

Introduction

ASEAN will be turning 55 next year. After safeguarding the region from the encroachment of the great powers' ideological sphere of influence during the Cold War, ASEAN has transformed Southeast Asia from a conflicted arena of insecurity and economic disadvantage into a new region of astonishing prosperity and greater political stability. It is now increasingly seen as part of the larger 'Asian Miracle' of which the external partners are eyeing to play some major roles. At the same time, however, ASEAN has also been facing various dilemmas in terms of internal setbacks, enduring challenges, and future uncertainties. Recently for instance, its relevance and unity (or the lack thereof) has been questioned by many, with critics citing both internal and external factors.

Historically, when the five "founding fathers of ASEAN" (namely: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) first agreed to establish a regional organization back in 1967, the initial attempt was to shield the region from the growing-spread of communism and the spillover effects of ideological contestation between the U.S. and former Soviet Union.¹ In fact, the intention to establish a regional cooperation platform had gone through several stages – including the Asian Relations Conference in 1947, to the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954, to the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) in 1961, to the Greater Malayan Confederation (MAPHILINDO Confederation) in 1963, and eventually ASEAN beginning in 1967 until today.² Back then, social unrest and unstable political situations coupled with unresolved conflicts between neighboring countries across the region were more evident. Apart from Thailand, all of the nation states had been under Western colonization for decades and thus the fight for national independence and sovereignty was far more prominent than for that of a regional cooperation platform. Even after the period of colonization had come to an end, the region was not at ease. Shortly after, during the Cold War climate of the 1960s, the region experienced the disastrous Vietnam War from 1965 to 1975, which had very unfortunate spillover effects on Cambodia's consecutive political regime changes during the 1970s, including the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge and its aftermath over the course of a few more decades until the reconciliation of peace and stability in 1998.

¹ Peter Church, *A short history of Southeast Asia*, 5th edition. (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons (Asia) Pte Ltd, 2009).

² Ibid.

Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar (then Burma), and Vietnam had also been invited to join ASEAN's formation in the early stages but instead declined for various reasons. Burma was still suffering from its 1962 military coup dilemma, with General Ne Win claiming to protect Burma's 'neutrality policy' by disregarding ASEAN. Similarly, Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam³ viewed the initiative as yet as another Western creation and thus, declined to take part. South Vietnam, though, was eager to join but was rather overwhelmed by the burden at home from the civil war with North Vietnam.⁴

ASEAN's fundamental principles, which were adopted in the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in Southeast Asia, underpin the "mutual respect for independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity for all nations, and as well non-interference in the internal affairs of one another".⁵ The so-called 'ASEAN Way' is designed to conform with regional principles and political history, illustrating the non-binding partnership of cooperation with minimal institutional bureaucracy, marginal supranational composition, and a strong component of consensus-building in relation to its decision-making process.⁶

This chapter will discuss the process leading to Cambodia's accession into ASEAN in 1999, the push and pull factors resulting in the delay, and the roles that existing ASEAN member states as well as some other external partners played in the process. It will also explore the 'misperception' of Cambodia's failure to endorse the issuing of a Joint Communiqué during its chairmanship of ASEAN in 2012. The ongoing narrative lays the blame on the Chair for having 'blocked' the Statement. The arguments put forward here attempt to challenge this narrative and to put into context the truth behind the curtain. The chapter will conclude with a deliberation on future prospects for Cambodia as the upcoming Chair of ASEAN in 2022 vis-à-vis its maneuverability capabilities amidst a dynamic of changing regional security architecture and an uncertain geopolitical landscape.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Estrella D. Solidum, *The Politics of ASEAN: An Introduction to Southeast Asia Regionalism*. (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003).

⁵ ASEAN, Overview. <https://asean.org/asean/about-asean/overview/>

⁶ Jurgen Haacke, *ASEAN's diplomatic culture: Origins, developments, and prospects*. (New York: Routledge, 2003).

Accession to ASEAN in 1999: The Push and Pull Factors

Cambodia eventually became the 10th member of ASEAN in April 1999 after years of holding an observer status and after deferral in 1997 due to its internal political crisis. From its establishment in 1967 until becoming a full member, there were several engagements between ASEAN and Cambodia vis-à-vis the country's political environment. At the edge of the Cold War dilemma, Cambodia's political climate was severely uncertain and unstable; yet the then Foreign Minister of Indonesia, Adam Malik, still insisted on inviting Prince Sihanouk, the then Head of State of Cambodia, to join ASEAN. Standing firmly on the principle of neutrality and non-alliance, as much as to avoid being trapped in the Vietnam War, Prince Sihanouk declined to join but proclaimed to remain a "friend of ASEAN".⁷ The political situation in Cambodia then deteriorated when Prince Sihanouk was ousted in a coup d'état staged by General Lon Nol and Prince Sirik Matak, declaring Cambodia a Republic for the first time in its history.⁸ However, the new pro-US, military-led Khmer Republic regime was not recognized as the legitimate government of Cambodia by ASEAN leaders.⁹ Over time, it gradually witnessed a major internal division which eventually led to civil war. Following the U.S. military's withdrawal from Southeast Asia, the regime collapsed at the hands of the Khmer Rouge in April 1975. The new genocidal regime of Democratic Kampuchea proceeded to isolate Cambodia from the rest of the world, including ASEAN, with China and several other communist countries as the very few exceptions.¹⁰

Relations between Cambodia and ASEAN were then cut off until the controversial intervention of Vietnamese troops and the United Front for National Salvation of Kampuchea (UFNSK) in 1979, which subsequently led to the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime. ASEAN, alongside China and the US, condemned Vietnam for violating Cambodia's sovereignty with a Joint Statement¹¹ issued during a Special ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting. The

⁷ Din Merican, Cambodia's engagement with ASEAN: Lesson learned for Timor-Leste. (Phnom Penh: Cambodia Institute for Cooperation and Peace, 2007), <https://cicp.org.kh/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CICP-working-paper-14-Cambodias-Engagement-in-ASEAN-by-Din-Merican.pdf>

⁸ Path Kosal, "Introduction: Cambodia's political history and foreign relations," in Deth Sok Udom, Sun Suon & Serkan Bulut (Ed.) Cambodia's foreign relations in regional and global contexts (Phnom Penh: Korad Adenauer Stiftung, 2017), 13.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Joint Statement: The Special ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting on The Current Political Development In The Southeast Asia Region Bangkok, 12 January 1979," last modified 2012,

Statement perceived the armed conflict between Vietnam and Cambodia as “the armed intervention against the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Kampuchea (Cambodia)” and called for the Vietnamese troops to withdraw from the territory. A new political regime – the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) – was later established with the help of Vietnam.¹² The situation however was not one of tranquility as there were several other political movements along the Cambodia-Thai border, namely: FUNCINPEC of Prince Sihanouk, KPNLF of Son Sann, and the Khmer Rouge.¹³ These three factions then joined together in 1982 under the official name “Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK)”, enjoying the assistance of ASEAN member states for many months and also holding Cambodia’s seat at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).¹⁴

There were also occasional clashes between the PRK government and CGDK coalition until negotiations took place under the ASEAN framework in 1988, known as the Jakarta Informal Meeting (JIM), as part of the initial effort to restore peace and stability in Cambodia. Indonesia’s then Foreign Minister, Ali Alatas, proposed to set up the Supreme National Council (SNC) of Cambodia to resolve the power-sharing mechanism and elevate the peace process to another level.¹⁵ Under international pressure, Vietnam began to withdraw its troops from Cambodia in 1989. Then in 1991, the Comprehensive Cambodian Peace Agreement or Paris Peace Agreement¹⁶ was signed by 19 signatories, which led to the formation of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) to operate its peacekeeping and peacebuilding mission in the country, ultimately leading to a successfully organized general election in 1993, despite the fact that the Khmer Rouge had boycotted it. The new government was formed

https://asean.org/?static_post=jointstatement-the-special-asean-foreign-ministers-meeting-on-the-current-political-development-in-the-southeastasia-region-bangkok-12-january-1979

¹² James Brook, “Why did Vietnam overthrow the Khmer Rouge in 1978?,” Khmer Times, August 7, 2014, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50673/why-did-vietnam-overthrow-the-khmer-rouge-in-1978/>

¹³ Michael Vickery, Cambodia: A political Survey, 14-15.
<http://michaelvickery.org/vickery2007cambodia.pdf>

¹⁴ Ang Cheng Guan, “The struggle for recognition of the CGDK,” Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian conflict 1978-1991, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013),
<http://m.en.freshnewsasia.com/index.php/en/localnews/14250-2019-06-07-08-46-26.html>

¹⁵ Sam Ath Sambath Sreysour & Dr. Oum Sothea, “Cambodia in the ASEAN context,” in Deth Sok Udom, Sun Suon & Serkan Bulut (Ed.) Cambodia’s foreign relations in regional and global contexts (Phnom Penh: Korad Adenauer Stiftung, 2017), 315.

¹⁶ “Paris Peace Agreement,” last modified 1991,
https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/KH_911023_FrameworkComprehensivePoliticalSettlementCambodia.pdf

under a dual prime ministership, due to the contested election result and also to avoid further political deadlock. Under this system, Prince Norodom Ranariddh of FUNCINPEC was the First Prime Minister while Samdech Hun Sen was the Second, with ASEAN recognizing the legitimacy of this UN-sponsored election.¹⁷

Despite the ongoing ambiguity of its political environment, Cambodia was invited to various ASEAN Ministerial Meetings throughout this period.¹⁸ It obtained an observer status in 1995 and signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) alongside as well. In May 1997, ASEAN Foreign Ministers announced in Kuala Lumpur that Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar would become a member state in July of that year.¹⁹ Unfortunately, internal clashes broke out between the loyalist forces of the two Prime Ministers which resulted in further delay of Cambodia's accession into ASEAN.²⁰ In response, ASEAN established the ASEAN Troika comprising three member states – Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines, as an attempt to promote the re-establishment of peace in Cambodia after the 'July 1997 event'.²¹ After political reform and reconciliation, Cambodia was then backed by Laos and Vietnam to once again be admitted as an ASEAN member state, and was eventually approved in April 1999. Cambodia became the 10th member of ASEAN, making it an ASEAN-10.²² The then Secretary General of ASEAN Rodolfo Severino said in his welcome statement during Cambodia's accession that: *"The realization of 'Asean-10' has not only a symbolic significance, but also immense implications for the future of our region. With mutual respect and equality, we have turned our diversity to our advantage and pulled together to advance our common interest in strengthening peace and stability in our region. The Kingdom of Cambodia's membership will be a substantial contribution to this endeavor."*

¹⁷ Kao Kim Hourn & Norbert von Hofmann, National elections: Cambodia's Experiences and Expectations (Phnom Penh: CICC, 1998)

¹⁸ Kao Kim Hourn, "Cambodia in ASEAN: Lessons learned and continuing challenges," In Kao Kim Hourn & Jeffery A. Kaplan (Ed.) Cambodia's future in ASEAN: Dynamo or Dynamite, (Phnom Penh: Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, 1998).

¹⁹ "Joint Statement of the Special Meeting of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers on Cambodia Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 10 July 1997," last modified 2012, https://asean.org/?static_post=joint-statement-of-the-special-meetingof-the-asean-foreign-ministers-on-cambodia-kuala-lumpur-malaysia-10-july-1997

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Kao Kim Hourn, "Cambodia in ASEAN: Lessons learned and continuing challenges," In Kao Kim Hourn & Jeffery A. Kaplan (Ed.) Cambodia's future in ASEAN: Dynamo or Dynamite (Phnom Penh: Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, 1998).

²² "Statement by the Secretary-General of ASEAN Welcoming the Kingdom of Cambodia as the Tenth Member State of ASEAN 30 April 1999," last modified 2012, https://asean.org/?static_post=statement-by-the-secretary-general-ofasean-welcoming-the-kingdom-of-cambodia-as-the-tenthmember-state-of-asean-30-april-1999-asean-secretariat

And after 32 years of establishment, ASEAN had finally fulfilled the founding fathers' vision to unite all Southeast Asia nations under one roof.²³

After its accession, many recognized its success in building the fundamental institutions necessary to foster its political and social stability. By 1999, Cambodia had a new Senate, Constitutional Council, and an active multi party National Assembly.²⁴ Whilst the country's political infrastructure has evolved in a progressive direction, the 1991 Paris Accords' five annexes were still very much relevant.²⁵ It was emphasized that ASEAN members have a continued obligation to ensure that the Paris Agreements remain a framework for Cambodia's political future. Back in the early 1990s, ASEAN's engagement policy with Cambodia was intended to re-establish a political order and democracy in accordance with the 1991 Paris Agreement and Cambodia's 1993 Constitution so that the country would be admitted as a member.²⁶ Overall, expectations from the Paris Agreement and ASEAN membership have been that Cambodia should organize credible elections, stabilize political engagement, improve member relationships, utilize their UN seat, and capitalize on investments.²⁷

Over the course of more than 20 years of membership, Cambodia has dedicated continuous effort in regards to engagement in regional and international affairs, and safeguarding its national interests while adhering to the expectations of other ASEAN stakeholders.²⁸ Despite lingering historical skirmishes and a few territorial disputes with neighboring countries, Cambodia has proven to be a worthy member of ASEAN and has taken advantage of the opportunities provided to improve its political, economic and socio-cultural frameworks.²⁹

²³ Ben Sokhean, "What it means for Cambodia to be an Asean member state," Khmer Times, 2019, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/599143/what-it-means-for-cambodia-to-be-an-asean-member-state/>

²⁴ Tony Kevin, "Cambodia and Southeast Asia," The CICP Distinguished Lecture Series Report, (Phnom Penh: Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, 1999).

²⁵ McCormick Eileen, "Paris Peace Accords Are Still Important for Cambodia," Khmer Times, 2018, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/524681/paris-peace-accords-are-still-important-for-cambodia/>

²⁶ Carlyle Thayer, "Cambodia and Regional Stability: ASEAN And Constructive Engagement," The CICP Distinguished Lecture Series Report, Phnom Penh: Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, 1998).

²⁷ Kao Kim Hourn, "Cambodia-From Crisis to Promise: Building the Future," The Conference Working Paper Series, (Phnom Penh: Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, 1998).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Pich Charadine, "Cambodia within ASEAN: Twenty-Years in the Making", Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Cambodia, p. 13, <https://www.kas.de/en/web/kambodscha/single-title/-/content/cambodia-within-asean-twenty-years-in-the-making>

Cambodia in ASEAN: Political Security aspect and its Misperception

ASEAN's Political Security Blueprint outlines key areas for cooperation in political development across the region, provides a framework for strategic infrastructure development, promotes the protection of human rights, and more. The Kingdom has enjoyed the benefits of ASEAN's cooperation mechanisms, its extensive partnership engagements, and the continuous prospect of collaboration which Cambodia has worked hard to restore after a long period of isolation on the international stage between the Khmer Rouge regime and UN peace mission in 1991. Its inclusion into the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) has strengthened Cambodia's momentum in narrowing the economic development gap between itself and other member states. The key priority areas of the IAI include infrastructure, human resource development, information and communications technology (ICT), capacity-building for regional economic integration, poverty reduction, and improvements in quality of life.³⁰

Nonetheless, hard security issues remain at a critical juncture with points of controversy on cross-cutting issues, such as the South China Sea, the Mekong, territorial skirmishes along the border, and the recent Myanmar crisis, just to name a few. The Cambodia-Thailand border dispute of 2008 and 2011 over Preah Vihear constituted a major disappointment in regard to the limited role ASEAN played in resolving hardline issues among member states due to the embedded principle of non-interference. Cambodia favored ASEAN's intervention, while Thailand opted for bilateral negotiations.³¹ ASEAN has limited capacity to manage regional tension, even among member states, since its mandate only enables it to issue [joint] statements of concern and compromise, with little to no ability to commit to the settlement of conflicts on the ground with the use of force.³²

Another challenge in relation to its political dilemma is that Cambodia has a very limited space to maneuver the increasingly tense great power competition dynamics and evolving regional security architecture. The South China Sea dispute has raised critical concerns regarding the threat it poses to regional peace

³⁰ Sowath Rana and Alexandre Ardichvili, "Cambodia and the ASEAN Economic Community: Opportunities, Challenges, And Implications for Human Resource Development," *Reconsidering Development* 3 (1), (2014), 39-53.

³¹ RepASEAN Desk, "After 20 Years, Cambodia Has Reaped Benefits From ASEAN". Reporting ASEAN - News Around ASEAN Regionalism, 2019, <http://www.aseannews.net/20-years-cambodia-reaped-benefits-asean/>

³² Pich Charadine, "Cambodia within ASEAN: Twenty-Years in the Making"

and stability, as well as the alarming general perception across the region and beyond that Cambodia has taken a favorable stance towards China at the expense of ASEAN Centrality and unity.³³ In fact, the South China Sea issue was present long before Cambodia became a member of ASEAN in 1999. And since becoming part of ASEAN, the Kingdom has been involved in many related meetings between all ASEAN member states and China, especially the adoption of the Declaration of Conduct of Parties (DOC) in the South China Sea which was signed during Cambodia's chairmanship in 2002. The Declaration urged for the "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea in accordance with the 1982 UNCLOS. In principle, Cambodia is not a directly involved counterpart nor a claimant state in the South China Sea dispute, though it has been continuously taking part in related meetings under the banner of ASEAN. However, a series of repercussions since Cambodia's 2012 chairmanship of ASEAN has inflicted tense deliberations toward Cambodia's stance from the perspective of some ASEAN member states and others.³⁴

During the ASEAN meetings in 2012, Vietnam urged Cambodia as the Chair to include the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Joint Communique, while the Philippines demanded that it highlight tension at the Scarborough Shoal – a conflict zone between the Filipino and Chinese Navies – in the Joint Statement. Deputy Prime Minister and the then Foreign Minister of Cambodia, H.E. Mr. Hor Namhong, was of the view that these issues in particular were bilateral disputes between China and Vietnam, and China versus the Philippines, respectively.³⁵ Those requests were then rejected and, hence, ASEAN failed to issue a Joint Statement for the first time in its 45 year history given the lack of consensus. Vietnam's Foreign Minister, Pham Binh Minh, was unsatisfied over the failure in issuing the Joint Statement,³⁶ while the Philippines accused Cambodia of "doing Beijing's bidding".³⁷ Cambodia responded saying that ASEAN was not a court to

³³ Ibid

³⁴ "After failed meeting, Cambodia defends ASEAN Chairmanship," VOA Cambodia, 28 July 2012, <https://www.voacambodia.com/a/after-failed-meeting-cambodia-defends-asean-chairmanship/1448043.html>

³⁵ Ernest Z. Bower, "China reveals its hand on ASEAN in Phnom Penh," Center for Strategic & International Studies, July 20, 2012, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-reveals-its-hand-asean-phnom-penh>

³⁶ Prak Chan Thul and Stuart Grudging, "SE Asia meeting in disarray over sea dispute with China," Reuters, July 13, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-asean-summit/se-asia-meeting-in-disarray-over-sea-dispute-with-chinaidUSBRE86C0BD20120713>

³⁷ Ibid.

judge those claims³⁸ and that South China Sea conflict should not be “internationalized”.³⁹ Samdech Prime Minister Hun Sen expressed his view during the 65th anniversary of the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) in 2016, claiming that the South China Sea is a dispute between China and the claimant states in ASEAN, not a conflict between ASEAN and China.⁴⁰

Furthermore, the recent Indo-Pacific Strategy led by the US versus the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China has raised concern that ASEAN might have to take sides. In this respect, ASEAN recently adopted the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), signifying its continued stance that the organization remains one of “centrality, inclusiveness, complementarities, a rules-based regional order based upon international law, and the commitment to advancing economic engagement in the region”.⁴¹ The truth however is that ASEAN’s collective efforts and pragmatic actions remain to be seen. The most sensitive area in the past few years regarding the South China Sea issue was the allegation that China planned to build a military base in Cambodia, with some even going as far to claim that the country could be at the center of a new Cold War.⁴² Although both Chinese and Cambodian officials have denied this, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia, Joseph Felter, posited concern over the possibility of “foreign military presence”⁴³ in Cambodia, which in turn, has diluted the already-sour relations between Cambodia and the U.S. This triangular relationship among Cambodia, China and the U.S. remains at a critical juncture and puts Cambodia in a complex position regarding foreign policy and its diplomatic maneuverability.

³⁸ Kong Sothearith, ASEAN reaffirms commitment to resolve South China Sea issue. Voice of America Cambodia, 20 July 2012, <https://www.voacambodia.com/a/aseanreaffirms-commitment-to-resolve-south-china-seaissue/1441954.html>

³⁹ Vong Sokheng and Shane Worrell, “Hu Pledges Million in Aid,” The Phnom Penh Post, April 02, 2012, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/hu-pledges-millions-aid>

⁴⁰ PRESS OCM, 28 June 2016 the 65th founding anniversary of the Cambodian People’s Party, last modified June 28, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O61rZRS99FQ&t=2699s>

⁴¹ “ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific,” last modified June 22, 2019, https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/ASEANOutlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf

⁴² David Hutt and Shawn W. Crispin, “Cambodia at the center of the new cold war,” Asia Times, November 15, 2019, <https://www.asiatimes.com/2018/11/article/cambodia-at-the-center-of-a-new-cold-war/>

⁴³ Pich Chomrong, “US Stirs More Speculation of Chinese Military Presence,” Voice of Democracy, July 2, 2019, <https://en.vodhotnews.com/us-stirs-more-speculation-ofchinese-military-presence/>

Future Prospective in 2022: The Maneuverability Aspect

Great power politics has proven to be an unavoidable phenomenon for Cambodia in particular and the Southeast Asian region as a whole, especially regarding the question of a regional rules-based order. ASEAN has played an important role in constructing regional institutions which abide by internationally accepted rules, norms and principles, thus far safeguarding the region from erupting into major conflict. Its existing cooperation platforms signify that continual collaboration is more prevalent than confrontation; disputes are to be resolved through the use of constant dialogue, not force. A pragmatic, rules-based regional order in the extended Asia-Pacific can be realized if and only if the perception of a future solely from the prism of US and China competition can be avoided.

Nonetheless, ASEAN cannot act as the “manager” of this regional order alone; its role will be further enhanced with the design of a constructive institutional arrangement that bridges the linkages with and between major powers as well as its external partners. Cambodia has been proactively engaged within the ASEAN framework and has been diversifying its foreign policy in relation to small state diplomacy.⁴⁴ The Kingdom needs to be more pragmatic by strengthening its diplomatic maneuverability in the midst of an increasing shift in the strategic security landscape and rising influence of great power competition in the region and beyond. Cambodia should adhere to its core principles of “neutrality and non-alignment” in accordance with Article 1 enshrined in the Constitution⁴⁵ by further embracing the hedging strategy as part of its larger foreign policy options. A tactical balancing and diversification strategy would allow Cambodia to both flourish in the economic realm and embrace the essence of ASEAN unity and Centrality at large.

As the upcoming Chair of ASEAN in 2022, Cambodia will handle an important task during one of the most critical times. First and foremost, with the unceasing power competition between the US and China, ASEAN remains in a diplomatically fraught position, especially on the South China Sea issue where conflict is not expected but tension could escalate into the use of force if not dealt with cautiously. Although Cambodia is clear on its position that the South China Sea is not an ASEAN-wide issue and that the dispute itself should be dealt with

⁴⁴ Cheang Vannarith, “Cambodia and the diplomacy of small states,” Khmer Times, July 07, 2017, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/65572/cambodia-and-the-diplomacy-of-small-states/>

⁴⁵ “Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia,” 1993, http://cambodia.ohchr.org/~cambodiaohchr/sites/default/files/Constitution_ENG.pdf

among the claimant states and particular stakeholders involved, the Kingdom will still be expected to facilitate further discussion on the matter as Chair. So far, the consultations on the Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea have witnessed the completion of the first reading of the COC single draft negotiating text ahead of schedule since July 2019.⁴⁶ The recent 19th Senior Officials' Meeting on the Implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, held in Chongqing in June 2021, also agreed to resume the second reading of the COC as soon as possible and strive for the early conclusion of the negotiations.⁴⁷ It would be another astonishing milestone for Cambodia to see it successfully adopted next year during its Chairmanship, as with the adoption of DOC back in 2002.

Second, with the Myanmar crisis likely to rage on, how will Cambodia respond as the Chair to its fellow member state's situation? Although the 'non-interference' principle of ASEAN still applies, the Myanmar crisis is a rather distinct one. That said, peace and stability in the region will likely be adversely affected if the political climate in Myanmar cannot be resolved. Discrete diplomacy shall be further enforced with the Special Envoy to Myanmar now just appointed. There is also a need to implement the Five-Points Consensus immediately, as agreed during the recent Special ASEAN Leaders' Meeting held in Jakarta on April 24, 2021.

Last but not least, with the anticipation that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will be slightly less severe by next year or so, there is a high expectation for the Chair to guide a regional economic recovery agenda that will help to recalibrate the respective member states' socio-economic development after the setback of the pandemic.

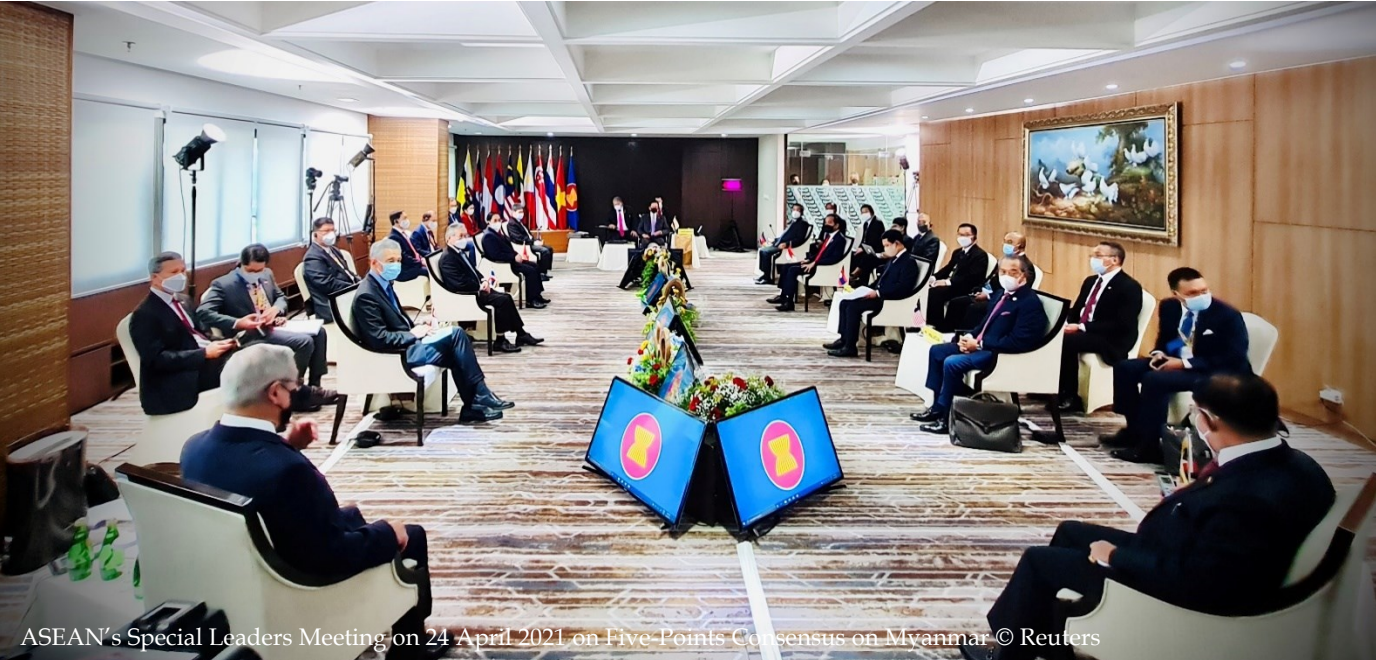
Conclusion

The Southeast Asia region is increasingly viewed as a strategic frontier for both political and economic reasons. The region was torn by historical phenomena, including the colonial era and its aftermath as well as the enduring civil wars that lasted for decades and continue to shape each individual country's political motives and strategies accordingly. Together with the rise of China, the

⁴⁶ "The First Reading of the Single Draft Negotiating Text of the Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea Completed Ahead of the Schedule," August 01, 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1685674.shtml

⁴⁷ "China, ASEAN countries to strive for early agreement on COC," June 07, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202106/1225642.shtml>

remarkable role of middle powers like Japan, India, South Korea, etc., coupled with the declining presence of the US in the region, a critical question is posed in regard to whether a major shift in the [existing] regional order is taking place. Our region today has managed to establish a multipolar system but the transition itself has not been without challenges along the way. The expectation is set high for ASEAN to uphold a rules-based regional order which deals with alarming threats to regional peace and security such as the South China Sea dispute. Although there are several mechanisms in ASEAN which can be relied upon in the pursuit of regional stability and prosperity, a wide range of political-security challenges remain to be dealt with.



ASEAN's Special Leaders Meeting on 24 April 2021 on Five-Points Consensus on Myanmar © Reuters

ASEAN’S RELEVANCE FOR REGIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

Kavi Chongkittavorn*

** **Kavi Chongkittavorn** is a Senior Fellow at Institute of Security and International Studies (ISIS) Thailand. He has been a journalist for more than three decades covering Thai and regional politics. He began his career as a reporter in 1983 and became the paper’s foreign news editor in 1986. Then, he was asked to explore Indochina – first as Bureau Chief in Phnom Penh, Cambodia (1988- 1990) and later on in Hanoi, Vietnam (1990-1992). After a year in Oxford University as Reuter Fellow in 1994, he went to Jakarta and served as Special Assistant - 22 - to the Secretary General of ASEAN in Jakarta in 1995 before returning to journalism. He was named the Human Rights Journalist of 1998 to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by Amnesty International. From 1999-2000, he was the President of Thai Journalists Association. From 2000-2001, he went to Harvard University as a Nieman Fellow. He served as a member of jury and from 2005-2008 as its chair of Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize organized by UNESCO.*

Introduction

The regional and international environment that enabled ASEAN to maintain peace and prosperity throughout its 54-year of existence has been upended. The COVID-19 pandemic has already created a new political and security landscape that requires innovative ways for the member states to interact with one another and the outside world. While ASEAN is tackling the adverse effects brought about by coronavirus, a military coup took place in Myanmar. These dual challenges have exposed ASEAN's time-tested way of managing and resolving regional issues. In the current era of smartphones and social media, the desire for immersion of views regarding the effectiveness of ASEAN-led mechanisms and ways of doing things has now become indispensable.

After the ASEAN Charter came into effect in 2009, ASEAN member states expected that their cooperation in all areas would become more efficient and timely. Compliance with, and the implementation of, previously agreed upon measures would be more prevalent given the common duty and responsibility implied by the Charter. The mid-term evaluation of the three pillars of cooperation—political and security, economic, social and culture—under the ASEAN Community 2025 have been quite satisfactory thus far. However, when it comes to unexpected developments, such as the COVID-19 risks and Myanmar's quagmire, ASEAN was frequently caught off-guard. Due to the ASEAN way and deep-rooted political culture, it often takes time for all the member states to come to grips with emergencies and reach consensus-based decisions in an appropriate timeframe.

This article will address ASEAN's two most pressing issues of late—the COVID-19 pandemic and Myanmar's crisis—to explore how ASEAN can cope with such challenges in a more efficient way. It is argued that to preserve and enhance peace and stability, it is necessary to further promote the principles and spirit enshrined in the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in the international community. ASEAN does not need to reinvent the wheel. Increased recognition of the TAC will allow it to conduct its diplomacy more broadly, both at regional and global levels. The COVID-19 pandemic and Myanmar's quagmire fit into this framework. For the time being, the TAC embodies the bloc's favoured practices and norms. ASEAN's main objective is to create a rules-based community, a direction it is indeed moving towards. Therefore, the way ASEAN handles the COVID-19 pandemic and Myanmar's crisis will indicate its level of relevance in the area of peace and security.

Key Issues in the Post-Pandemic World

The management of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic recovery as well as Myanmar's quagmire, will determine whether ASEAN can remain relevant to the region's future. For the past 54 years, ASEAN has served Southeast Asia well in underpinning peace and prosperity after the end of colonization. In particular, the ASEAN way has proved to be effective in engaging members as well as dialogue partners throughout five decades of ups and downs. While this traditional approach to non-interference and consensus-making remains sacrosanct, it is high time that members started to think of innovative methods that will further empower the ASEAN way without stalling efforts for closer cooperation. Learning from the latest development related to Myanmar, the chair should have a prerogative power to lead and initiate new plans. The rest of the members should render support for the Chair's decision in response to such crises.

Dealing with COVID-19 has become a barometer of how member countries can coordinate with one another in ways that can increase the efficiency of the so-called regional approach. In the early months of the pandemic, the ASEAN members were too focused on mitigation programs to contain the spread of coronavirus within their borders. However, after the establishment of the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund and the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework last year, the member states have incrementally undertaken joint implementation of new action plans. An example is the bloc's decision at the 54th annual conference to utilize US\$10.5 million of the US\$20.8 million response fund to procure vaccines under the COVAX program for individual ASEAN countries and staff of the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta. The fund is sufficient enough to purchase approximately 10 million doses of vaccines which will be equally distributed among the 10 members. In the near future, Thailand, Vietnam and Singapore, which have developed the capacity to produce local vaccines, both under foreign license and indigenous brands, will help to contribute to the wellbeing of the 654-million strong ASEAN Community. A surplus of vaccines from these three countries could be traded with or given to ASEAN members in need.

At the 54th annual conference, it was clear that the bloc's dialogue partners have full confidence in ASEAN to tackle the crisis in Myanmar and deal with the pandemic. All dialogue members, including the UK, have contributed modest funding for ASEAN to combat COVID-19. They also pledged to donate more vaccines in the foreseeable future. In the coming weeks and months, further

planning and collaboration among ASEAN countries will be needed to vet the assistance packages provided by dialogue partners, which amounted to roughly US\$1.2 billion¹ combined financial package. Most of the funds aim to improve members' capacity to respond to the pandemic, especially the Delta variant which has been ravaging the entire region since the second quarter of this year.

Over the past seven months, ASEAN has been under attack by the international community and civic and rights organizations around the world for its slow response to the situation in Myanmar. After the February coup, the military leadership has been battling the protestors, who have now been trained and armed by local ethnic armed groups. The violence was supposed to halt immediately after the Five-Point Consensus was agreed upon at the end of April. But the domestic condition has been too precarious for the Tatmadaw to agree readily to the ceasefire, with the civil disobedience movement intensifying its anti-Tatmadaw campaign.

So far, the ASEAN chair, Brunei, has been playing strictly by the book, without giving in to peer pressure from its ASEAN colleagues on the choice of the ASEAN special envoy, resulting in several weeks of delay. For the ASEAN decision-makers, the time-consuming process of picking the right special envoy testified to the importance of consensus making in ASEAN. Without it, nothing can proceed and it can cause divides within ASEAN. However, once all members agree on an issue or action, it is well understood that no country can retract but has to honor the agreement fully. In this case, the chair should be more prudent and act in a more timely manner. Both COVID-19 and the situation in Myanmar need a quicker response from ASEAN. The lack of information related to progress and ongoing ASEAN plans have inevitably led to misinformation about the ASEAN's efforts to jointly mitigate the coronavirus as well as its involvement in Myanmar. More timely and relevant information about ASEAN's views and actions must be forthcoming. The ASEAN Secretariat should be mandated with the consent of the chair to disseminate timely information to pre-empt any here-say about ASEAN.

Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) Gaining Prevalence

To promote political and security cooperation among ASEAN and beyond, it is necessary for ASEAN to increase the profile of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in the global forum. Since the enactment of the TAC in

¹ <https://www.thaipbsworld.com/asean-collects-us1-2-billion-in-aid-from-dialogue-partners/>

Southeast Asia in 1976², the accession of non-ASEAN members to this regional code of conduct has served as a barometer to gauge attitudes and perceptions of ASEAN as a regional organization. At the beginning, the TAC was strictly applied among ASEAN members. Throughout the first twenty years, the principles enshrined in the treaty prevented war and preserved peace, allowing the region to concentrate on economic development. In 1992, ASEAN felt that this regional code of conduct could be applied voluntarily for the rest of the world. The principles of non-interference, non-use of force and specific means to solve conflict, as well as respect of national sovereignty, are universally accepted norms.

Since China and India became signatories in 2003, the number of countries wanting to accede to the TAC has increased rapidly. In the past 18 years, an additional 38 countries, including the five powerful members of the UN Security Council, have joined the TAC. Under Brunei's chair, six countries (Denmark, the Netherlands, Greece, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates) signed on, the largest number ever in a single year. Nearly a quarter of UN members have now formally recognized the bloc's regional code of conduct. It is interesting to note that new signatories are coming from Africa and the Middle East as well as industrialized countries. In the next few decades, the TAC could gain more recognition and acceptance as an international norm to further guarantee peace and stability.

Conclusion

In the post-pandemic world, ASEAN's political and security cooperation will have to rely more and more on its code of conduct, especially if it seeks to guard against outside interference and intervention. The TAC is a powerful instrument as all great powers have accepted the principles contained in the treaty and voluntarily abided by them. The conclusion of the ongoing negotiations on the code of conduct in the South China Sea is also pivotal for the region's future. It could serve as a diplomatic tool to avert major conflicts in the world's crowded sea-lanes and open communication. The ASEAN-China Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, if concluded successfully, would herald a new era of

² The author thanked Prof. Susumu Yamakage, Aoyama Gakuin University, for his comprehensive reviews of Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in "Evolving ASEAN and Changing Roles of the TAC", <https://www.google.co.th/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjV8P6z4qfyAhWLzTgGHeBwDnsQFnoECAIQAO&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eria.org%2Fpublications%2Fasean-50-volume-4-building-asean-community-political-security-and-socio-cultural-reflections%2F&usg=AOvVaw3iGtK08dxAJI16PahBAmxR>

cooperation between major and regional organizations. In the foreseeable future, as the TAC gathers more signatories covering all the continents, ASEAN must look for innovative ways to ensure that these signatories will abide by the TAC principles through legal instruments. Above all, ASEAN must develop a new media strategy that provides timely updates and progress of the bloc's activities to prevent any form of misinformation about ASEAN on all media platforms.



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ASEAN REGIONALISM: AN ASPIRATION OR A MYTH?

Dr. Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby*

**Dr. Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby is Associate Professor in the Department of International Studies of De La Salle University. Her areas of specialization are ASEAN's external relations, security cooperation, and critical international relations theory.*

Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has long been touted as the poster child for regional cooperation amongst newly independent states. Since its formation in 1967, the post-colonial states of Southeast Asia managed to transcend their fragile and unconsolidated statehood and – amidst heightened competition between two superpowers during the Cold War – transformed a volatile region into a stable and cooperative one. Indeed, despite the fact that Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore are still reeling from the aftereffects of *Konfrontasi* and Malaysia and the Philippines remain embroiled in a sticky territorial dispute in Sabah, the founding states of ASEAN have proved their resilience and commitment to cooperation. Their ability to stabilize intra-regional relations inevitably extended outwards by pulling outside powers in. The resulting regional security order placed the United States in a central gravitational role, with China, Japan, and India playing supporting roles.¹ Bringing external powers in, treating them as constitutive forces of the regional architecture, and institutionalizing these arrangements in a multiplicity of regionalisms in Southeast Asia support the claim that ASEAN has successfully used “complex engagement” in its international relations.² Hence, the complementary narratives of how ASEAN stabilized intraregional relations and of how it brought outside powers in lead to a logical conclusion that the region has moved ever closer towards a cohesive security community.³

However, faith in ASEAN is to a large extent misplaced. While not discounting the significant achievements and contributions of the organization, the so-called ASEAN Way is taken as a given or as a convenient term that obscures a very nuanced process of conducting intra- and extra-regional relations. In this sense, to claim that the ASEAN Way is a major factor in Southeast and East Asia’s “long peace” is premature as it neglects to explain *how* the process maintains regional stability.⁴ To be fair, ASEAN’s goals in 1967 focused on economic development and regional peace and stability. These were articulated in the principles of non-

¹ Evelyn Goh, “Hierarchy and the Role of the United States in the East Asian Security Order,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 8, 3 (September 2008): 353-377.

² Alice D. Ba, “Who’s Socializing Whom? Complex Engagement in Sino-ASEAN Relations,” *The Pacific Review* 19, 2 (2006): 157-179.

³ Alice D. Ba, *(Re)Negotiating East and Southeast Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: The Problem of Regional Order* (London: Routledge, 2001).

⁴ Timo Kivimäki, “The Long Peace of ASEAN,” *Journal of Peace Research* 38, 1 (January 2001): 5-25; Timo Kivimäki, “East Asian Relative Peace and the ASEAN Way,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 11, 1 (January 2011): 57-85.

interference (mutual respect and recognition of each other's sovereign and territorial integrity), dispute settlement (peacefully and without recourse to the use or the threat of the use of force), and consensus (as a guarantee to the effective cooperation between and among member states). These principles frame the ASEAN Way and constitute the core pillars of the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). The context no doubt sets a pretext for the compelling power of ASEAN's norms and values.

Non-interference was successful during the first few decades of ASEAN's establishment.⁵ This was evidenced by the fact that there was no case of conflict nor resort to the use of force between ASEAN member states. An argument can be made that the non-interference norm persists because of a shared belief in the states' strength and capability to address domestic issues.⁶ However, this can also be interpreted as a cover for highly nationalistic states not wanting to help the citizenry of other countries. After all, to advocate *for* interference in the domestic affairs of another member state is to be willing to share the burden and the resources needed to confront an issue that can potentially have regional consequences. Thus, despite ASEAN's success in its early years, the norm of non-interference has evolved to become a symbol of controversy, especially as more member states strongly advocate for human rights and democracy causes and the spillover effects of cooperation cannot be fully realized without some level of domestic impingement.⁷ Others have argued that despite the high premium placed on the norm, many violations have in fact taken place.⁸ In short, ASEAN has been paying lip service to non-interference when it is convenient to do so.

The Pacific Settlement of Disputes is also one of the cornerstones of the ASEAN Way, which echoes the values of the post-Second World War era and stands as a prerequisite to the creation and maintenance of a rules-based international order. In Southeast Asia, the management of disputes rested on a complex process of confidence-building and conflict avoidance. Doing so allowed the ASEAN countries to consolidate their fledgling states and boost economic development.⁹

⁵ Robin Ramcharan, "ASEAN and Non-Interference: A Principle Maintained," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 22, 1 (2000): 60-88.

⁶ Sanae Suzuki, "Why is ASEAN Not Intrusive? Non-Interference Meets State Strength," *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 8, 2 (2019): 157-176.

⁷ Taku Yukawa, "The ASEAN Way as a Symbol: An Analysis of Discourses on the ASEAN Norms," *The Pacific Review* 31, 3 (2018): 298-314.

⁸ Lee Jones, "ASEAN's Unchanged Melody? The Theory and Practice of 'Non-Interference' in Southeast Asia," *The Pacific Review* 23, 4 (2010): 479-502.

⁹ Mely Caballero-Anthony, "Mechanisms of Dispute Settlement: The ASEAN Experience," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 20, 1 (April 1998): 38-66.

ASEAN's dispute management mechanisms ranged from formal ones, which include a broad platform of meetings, discussions, and consultations that are embedded in the organization's institutional makeup, to informal ones whose trademark is conflict avoidance and yet not conflict resolution. This is to say that conflicts are dealt with by postponing any discussions about difficult issues or even proscribing public debate.¹⁰ This is easier said than done as it involves the deft and yet sensitive work of diplomacy, networking, third-party mediation, and accepting standoffs and impasses as natural parts of the process.¹¹ Like non-interference, the ASEAN Way of dispute settlement proved invaluable mostly in the early years when it was much easier to shelve brewing tensions for the present and to revisit them at a later point in time. This was the case for the dispute around Sabah between the Philippines and Malaysia and the 1968 Indonesia-Singapore crisis, both of which remain unsettled today. These, along with the more recent examples of Indonesia's conflicts with the Acehnese and the Papuans, were "terminated" by way of allowing them to "fizzle away by means of inaction."¹² Even if doing nothing is already doing something, waiting out intractable issues, such as the South China Sea dispute, may just prove to be the proverbial straw that breaks ASEAN's back.

The third norm that buttresses the ASEAN Way is consultative and consensual decision-making, which is guided by the traditional village practices of *musyawarah* (consultation) and *muafakat* (consensus). A gradual and incremental process that is anchored in unanimity are the main characteristics of this decision-making procedure. Moreover, this makes room for face-saving and allows "performances" of sovereignty, kinship, confidence building, and downplaying (and thereby avoiding) conflicts.¹³ While this is a distinctly ASEAN way of doing things, these performances in many ways feel like an empty shell. They appear to constitute an action in a series of actions that are done under the guise of sovereignty and for the sake of doing something, even if that something amounts to almost nothing in terms of concrete action.

Hence, the ASEAN Way and the three norms that underpin it (non-interference, dispute settlement, and consensus) have been placed on a pedestal – and with good reason. ASEAN has indeed become not only the "primary manager," but

¹⁰ Shaun Narine, *Explaining ASEAN: Regionalism in Southeast Asia* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2002).

¹¹ Caballero-Anthony.

¹² Kivimäki (2011), 66.

¹³ Deepak Nair, "Saving Face in Diplomacy: A Political Sociology of Face-to-Face Interactions in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations," *European Journal of International Relations* 25, 3 (2019): 672-297.

also the “regional conductor.”¹⁴ It pursued several pathways in the creation of a regional order, not least of which is the “omni-enmeshment” of major powers like the United States and China that involved a complex balancing of external influence.¹⁵ ASEAN’s “brokerage” role, however, was limited because bringing outside powers in was one thing, but adjusting key strategic norms to accommodate new players and dynamics was an entirely different thing altogether.¹⁶ ASEAN has, in short, failed to adapt to new circumstances. It remains locked in a traditionalist diplomatic code of conduct and unfortunately, its persistence is not a testament to its strength or durability, but rather to its inability to self-revise, even in the face of crises.¹⁷ Additionally, it has also failed to become a durable, cohesive security community, despite the prospect of a rising China in the region.¹⁸

The list of failures may indeed be long and various approaches in International Relations offer a range of different ways to identify and analyze such mistakes. A lot has been said about the symptoms of ASEAN failings, but much less has been said about the underlying conditions and configurations of how ASEAN’s actions, or in-actions, have resulted in these failures. As such, the aim of this chapter is to investigate the underlying processes behind ASEAN regionalism. The argument put forward here is that the “ASEAN way” reified regional and international relations, subsequently placing South-East Asia along path dependent dynamics, which created a myth masked as an aspiration. Below, the concept and process of reification, as well as its consequences in the context of the three norms that prop the ASEAN Way and the South China Sea disputes are explained in further detail. The aim is to contribute to the discipline by way of a reminder to exercise reflexivity and understand the historical and social embeddedness of regional arrangements.

¹⁴ Robert Yates, “ASEAN as the ‘Regional Conductor’: Understanding ASEAN’s Role in Asia-Pacific Order,” *The Pacific Review* 30, 4 (2017): 443-461.

¹⁵ Evelyn Goh, “Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies,” *International Security* 32, 3 (Winter 2007/2008): 113-157.

¹⁶ Evelyn Goh, “Institutions and the Great Power Bargain in East Asia: ASEAN’s Limited ‘Brokerage’ Role,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 11, 3 (September 2011): 373-401.

¹⁷ Mathew Davies, “A Community of Practice: Explaining Change and Continuity in ASEAN’s Diplomatic Environment,” *The Pacific Review* 29, 2 (2016): 211-233.

¹⁸ Jun Yan Chang, “Essence of Security Communities: Explaining ASEAN,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 16, 3 (September 2016): 335-369.

Configurations

The charge that ASEAN engaged in reification to the detriment of the region is a serious one indeed. However, far from simply piling one mistake after another on an already struggling entity, this article is a call to arms, so to speak, to bring back a degree of critical introspection and confront the historicity and contingency of ASEAN regionalism. To reach that end, a prerequisite step is to tease out what exactly reification is, how it takes place, and why it can be dangerous.

At its core, reification in social science refers to processes where concepts take a life on their own and engender an objective, self-evident reality, one that is natural and uncontested.¹⁹ It refers to the process of representing an abstract concept as a material or concrete thing. An example would be when the idea of happiness, a subjective human emotion occurring differently in all of us, is represented as an objective phenomenon that can be reliably measured and compared across cultures. Much like Frankenstein's monster, the creature becomes imbued with agency far beyond what was intended for it. This happens when the distance and the distinction between the concepts that we use and the phenomena they are meant to describe shrink, thereby conflating one with the other.²⁰ As a result, reification is a "kind of forgetting" of the separation between concepts and the objects to which they refer and that therefore naturalizes and cements amnesia.²¹

This begs a question, however. In what way do such processes become widespread within a given culture? Research into social norms suggests that specific behaviors and "ways of doing things" first emerge from norm entrepreneurs before spreading throughout the rest of society.²² Yet once the norm becomes entrenched within a given culture, it then becomes very difficult to change. This can give rise to path dependency where it becomes increasingly

¹⁹ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).

²⁰ Katarzyna Kaczmarek, "Reification in IR: The Process and Consequences of Reifying the Idea of International Society," *International Studies Review* 21 (2019): 347-372.

²¹ Daniel J. Levine, *Recovering International Relations: The Promise of Sustainable Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²² Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization* 52, 4 (Autumn 1998): 887-917; Annika Björkdahl, "Norms in International Relations: Some Conceptual and Methodological Reflections," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 15, 1 (2002): 9-23; Alexander Betts and Phil Orchard, *Implementation and World Politics: How International Norms Change Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

hard to follow a different course. Given this logic, one can see how the ASEAN Way, including the norms of non-interference, dispute settlement and consensus, has likely become entrenched within individual member states.

From a social science perspective, reification paves the way for a skewed knowledge production process when individual strategies become disciplinary practices.²³ The outcome is a stable set of concepts, frameworks, discourses, narratives, and truths that are the ready explanations of real-world events. The danger here is that “a reified category, once it becomes the default language through which to think and talk about international politics, narrows down avenues for diverging interpretations of international politics.”²⁴ In the case of ASEAN, the member states reified the norms of non-interference, dispute settlement, and consensus and categorized them under the umbrella of the ASEAN Way. This then became *the* frame to see intra-mural relations and what defined ASEAN regionalism. In becoming both an analytical lens and an agent, the ASEAN Way has reached peak status as an aspiration, even though it is fraught with challenges. As the analysis below demonstrates, the region’s commitment to the ASEAN Way severely limited the member states in coming up with viable solutions to the South China Sea disputes.

Consequences

To understand how the repeated reference to and insistence on using the ASEAN Way has limited the group’s capacity to act decisively, the following analysis makes three points using the South China Sea dispute as an illustrative case. First, the norm of non-interference left the Philippines with little choice but to search for diverse new ways to lobby its position, even if these had the unintended consequence of accelerating tensions with China. Second, while ASEAN’s dispute settlement mechanisms are numerous, China’s assertive moves in the contested waters remain unhindered. Finally, the slow and incremental process of coming up with a Code of Conduct (COC) demonstrates the challenges of consensus decision-making.

The argument that China is a rising power that needs to be socialized into the international system was widespread in the wake of the post-Cold War period. Today, however, with Beijing’s claim on all of the land features in the South China Sea and its use of coercive tools, ranging from diplomatic and economic

²³ Kaczmarek.

²⁴ Ibid., 347.

sanctions to military coercion and inducement, it is safe to assume that most in Southeast Asia have moved beyond the promise of socialization. This sentiment resonates well among many regional observers, especially since China's actions seem to mimic ASEAN norms and thereafter resulted in a divide-and-rule strategy.²⁵

Cognizant of the norm of non-interference, the South China Sea is an illuminating case study on how the Philippines and China utilized ASEAN to achieve their respective goals: "the Philippines used regionalism for bilateral ends, whereas China used bilateralism for regional ends."²⁶ The irony is that the norm of non-interference precluded ASEAN from either supporting the Philippines' and other member states' claims or taking a firmer stand against China. A case in point was in China's assertion of its historical rights to the waters, seabed, and subsoil within the nine-dash line, as well as its insistence that the issue was not an ASEAN agenda. There is some truth to this claim, considering that the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) – an ASEAN document – uses the term 'parties' instead of referring to the organization as an entity. In that sense, the dispute was between China and *some* ASEAN countries, not between China and ASEAN. A clever move on China's part was when it individually summoned the ASEAN member state representatives in Beijing, which resulted in the South China Sea not appearing on the agenda of the 15th ASEAN-China Senior Officials Meeting in 2009.²⁷ Likewise, China's aversion to multilateralism was displayed when it argued, "Disputes on the outer limits of the continental shelf *cannot be solved through multilateral channels*."²⁸ On the other hand, multilateralism was the Philippines' preferred method. It noted that "the South China Sea is an issue with regional security ramifications...that affects ASEAN-China relations."²⁹ Similar to China's move of summoning ASEAN

²⁵ Ketian Zhang, "Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing's Use of Coercion in the South China Sea," *International Security* 44, 1 (Summer 2019): 117-159; Huong Le Thu, "China's Dual Strategy of Coercion and Inducement Towards ASEAN," *The Pacific Review* 32, 1 (2019): 20-36.

²⁶ Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby, "How to Change the Game in Security Cooperation: The Case of the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership," *Institute of East Asian Studies Working Paper* 121, University of Duisburg-Essen, 2018.

²⁷ Memorandum from the Embassy of the Philippines in Beijing to Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Philippines. No. ZPE-0691-2009 (8 September 2009). *Memorial of the Philippines*, vol. IV, annex 61.

²⁸ Memorandum from Assistant Secretary, Asian and Pacific Affairs, Department of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Philippines, to Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Philippines (7 February 2011). *Memorial of the Philippines*, vol. IV, annex 68. Emphasis in the original.

²⁹ Memorandum from Secretary-General, Commission on Maritime and Ocean Affairs Secretariat, Department of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Philippines to the Secretary of

representatives, the Philippines wrote a Note Verbale to all the ASEAN embassies in Manila and urged those countries to protest China's actions.³⁰

These diverging views set the tone for the escalation of the dispute in the next couple of years. Three incidents are especially pertinent. First, in 2011, two Chinese Marine Surveillance (CMS) ships approached a Philippine-commissioned survey ship that was conducting seismic surveys near the Reed Bank. The Chinese vessels' aggressive approach left the Philippine survey ship with no choice but to stop operations. The Chinese Embassy's reaction to this was to admit that the Chinese vessels' intention was really to stop the Philippine survey ship from further work to protect Chinese sovereignty and sovereign rights in the face of the Philippines' unilateral action.³¹ The Philippines responded to this by pointing out that the Philippines has sovereignty and jurisdiction over the Kalayaan Island Group (KIG) and that the Reed Bank where the survey ship was operating forms part of the continental shelf of the Philippines under UNCLOS.³² Second, also in 2011, the Philippines' Department of Energy offered 15 petroleum blocks to private companies for exploration and development in two areas near the Reed Bank. Predictably, China objected to this based on its indisputable sovereign claims, rights, and jurisdiction over all the islands in the South China Sea.³³

Third, the Philippines law enforcement in 2012 attempted to arrest Chinese fishermen in areas under the Philippines fishing jurisdiction. Chinese government vessels prevented the arrest by overtly interfering.³⁴ In retaliation, a

Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Philippines (28 March 2011). *Memorial of the Philippines*, vol. IV, annex 71. Emphasis in the original.

³⁰ Note Verbale from the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines to the Embassies of ASEAN Member States in Manila. No. 12-1372 (May 2012). *Memorial of the Philippines*, vol. VI, annex 210.

³¹ Note Verbale from the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Philippines to the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Manila. No. 110526 (2 March 2011). *Memorial of the Philippines*, vol. VI, annex 198; Memorandum from Acting Assistant Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Philippines to the Secretary of Foreign Affairs (10 March 2011). *Memorial of the Philippines*, vol. VI, annex 70.

³² Note Verbale from the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines to the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Manila. No. 110885 (4 April 2011). *Memorial of the Philippines*, vol. VI, annex 199.

³³ Note Verbale from the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Manila to the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Philippines. No. (11) PG-202 (7 July 2011). *Memorial of the Philippines*, vol. VI, annex 202.

³⁴ Note Verbale from the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Philippines to the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Manila. No. 12-0894 (11 April 2012). *Memorial of the Philippines*, vol. VI, annex 205.

Chinese vessel and an aircraft harassed a Philippine vessel doing maritime archaeological research at Scarborough Shoal and ordered it to leave.³⁵ This was perhaps the last straw for the Philippines. Seeing no other recourse, either from ASEAN or its only ally the United States, the Philippines lodged a case against China at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in January 2013.³⁶ The ruling was given in July 2016 in favor of the Philippines.³⁷

Thus, ASEAN's reification of the norm of non-interference pushed the Philippines to find other means to protect its national interest, thereby escalating tensions in the South China Sea. Had there been other options available, especially since the Philippines has favored a regional and multilateral approach, the escalation could have been tempered and the issue managed. However, other than injunctions and repetitive reminders that ASEAN stands by its non-interference norm or that member states ought to settle their disputes in a peaceful manner, not much has been achieved in terms of a long-lasting solution to the issue. From here, the discussion will now turn to ASEAN's dispute settlement mechanisms. The platforms to address disputes are numerous, but they are still unable to prevent China from making assertive moves in the contested waters.

ASEAN's main framework for dispute resolution is enshrined in the TAC and supported by the ASEAN Charter. Interestingly, specific mechanisms are not identified apart from references to "peaceful" processes. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), meanwhile, details a three-step process involving confidence building, preventive diplomacy, and conflict resolution. Currently, the main ASEAN document specific to the South China Sea is the DOC. Considered as a stepping stone to a COC, the DOC emphasizes the UN Charter, UNCLOS, ASEAN's TAC, as well as the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. It endorses freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, peaceful dispute resolution processes, the exercise of self-restraint, and confidence building via consultation and negotiation. The ideal scenario is for the conclusion of a COC, but the negotiations were put on hold because of more urgent issues, e.g., ASEAN's membership expansion, the 1997 financial crisis, and an increase in China's clout. As a result, COC negotiations reached a stalemate and ASEAN's initial solidarity

³⁵ Note Verbale from the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Philippines to the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Manila. No. 12-1030 (15 April 2012). *Memorial of the Philippines*, vol. VI, annex 206.

³⁶ Notification and Statement of Claim of the Republic of the Philippines (22 January 2013), *Memorial of the Philippines*, vol. III, annex 2.

³⁷ Award in the Matter of the South China Sea Arbitration (12 July 2016).

waned.³⁸ Additionally, China's actions became increasingly seen as a clear dismissal of the terms of the DOC.³⁹ Moreover, despite public reassurances of its continued commitment to the completion of a legally binding COC, China continued with its provocations, including harassing fisherfolks and building artificial islands before then occupying them. In short, despite frameworks for dispute settlement, ranging from the TAC, the ARF process, and the DOC, China's actions continue unabated.

Hence, while ASEAN insists on the need for the Pacific Settlement of Disputes, its mechanisms are unable to influence or stop China's actions in the South China Sea. Interestingly, the repeated references to this norm engendered a promise and a dynamic that the norm itself is incapable of fulfilling. Thus, in ASEAN's reification of the norm of dispute settlement, it proved only an empty promise.

A final norm that reinforces the ASEAN Way is consensus. Like non-interference and dispute settlement, consensus was conceived in 1967 to work as a cushion for the fledgling states in Southeast Asia. It served them well in the early years, but later became an entry point for China's divide and rule strategy. There are several incidents to support this, the first being Cambodia's decision as ASEAN Chair in 2012 to block any mention of China's role in the Scarborough Shoal incident and in Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Joint Communiqué of the ASEAN Foreign Minister's Meeting. As other member states offered alternative descriptors, the Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Hor Namhong reportedly consulted with China and upon returning to the meeting, rejected all suggestions.⁴⁰ The outcome was that ASEAN failed to meet a consensus over a joint communiqué. A second incident where the member states were unable to reach a consensus was when Indonesia submitted its "non-paper" entitled "Zero Draft: A Regional Code of Conduct in the South China Sea." Regrettably, this did not gain much traction, not least because of the lack of ASEAN consensus on the matter. There have likewise been reports that China reached a "four-point consensus" with Cambodia, Laos, and Brunei about China's position in the South China Sea and that, further, the matter should be resolved bilaterally instead of multilaterally, i.e., via ASEAN.⁴¹

³⁸ Christopher B. Roberts, "ASEAN, the 'South China Sea' Arbitral Award, and the Code of Conduct: New Challenges, New Approaches," *Asian Politics and Policy* 10, 2 (2018): 190-218.

³⁹ Christopher B. Roberts, "ASEAN: The Challenge of Unity in Diversity," in *The South China Sea Maritime Dispute: Political, Legal and Regional Perspectives*, eds. Leszek Buszynski and Christopher B. Roberts (New York: Routledge, 2015), 130-148.

⁴⁰ "Cambodia's Foreign Relations: Losing the Limelight," *The Economist*, 17 July 2012.

⁴¹ Roberts (2018).

In sum, the norms that constitute the pillars of the ASEAN Way have been reified in a way that has had deleterious effects on how the organization grapples with the South China Sea dispute. All three norms proved useful to the respective ASEAN member states in the early years, but as conflicts such as this have become intertwined with a multiplicity of complex issues, ASEAN can no longer merely recite the same script. In terms of non-interference, the lack of ASEAN support propelled the Philippines to ultimately file an arbitration case against China, which predictably angered the rising power and led to an escalation in tensions. If it were not for non-interference, such an escalation could have been prevented. Regarding dispute settlement, the plethora of institutionalized mechanisms in the ASEAN framework still proved to be ineffective against China's aggressive moves. Finally, consensus was initially meant to ease the member states into regional cooperation, but China has managed to use this norm as leverage in its divide and rule strategy. This analysis on how ASEAN's commitment to and reification of the norms of non-interference, dispute settlement, and consensus led to its inability to confront one of the major issues facing the region. ASEAN's path-dependent trajectory supports the earlier claim that the organization's brand of regionalism created a myth that serves as an aspiration to its member states.

Undoing the Reification

As established in the preceding analysis, reification has some very malign side effects. Far from arguing that ASEAN has now lost its utility, its brand of regionalism can indeed be reinvigorated, providing that some fundamental adjustments are made. First, undoing the reification is possible by engaging in reflexivity, or the capacity to think about one's own situation and process and how these affect one's interactions with others.⁴² Unfortunately for ASEAN, this self-reflection was perhaps not done regularly and so it further burrowed itself in the ASEAN Way. Consistent checks on one's position enables one to change their course of action when such a course no longer proves useful.

A second way to undo the reification process and reinvigorate ASEAN regionalism is to confront – and accept – that ASEAN Centrality needs to be decentered. Insisting on centrality is counterproductive as more arrangements

⁴² Inanna Hamati-Ataya, "Reflectivity, Reflexivity, Reflexivism: IR's 'Reflexive Turn' – and Beyond," *European Journal of International Relations* 19, 4 (2012): 669-694; Alexander D. Barder and Daniel J. Levine, "The World is Too Much with Us': Reification and the Depoliticizing of *Via Media* Constructivist IR," *Millennium* 40, 3 (2012): 585-604; Stefano Guzzini, "The Ends of International Relations Theory: Stages of Reflexivity and Modes of Theorizing," *European Journal of International Relations* 19, 3 (2013): 521-541.

emerge and as multilateralism risks being diluted.⁴³ To prevent this, ASEAN needs to be more open to the idea of minilateralism. Arguably, minilateralism's strength lies in its informality and flexibility, but that it remains an underdeveloped mode of cooperation.⁴⁴ Perhaps ASEAN can take advantage of parallel arrangements, such as the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (also known as 'the Quad') and the recent turn to the Indo-Pacific of European countries. The common denominator of the emergence of these mini-lateral arrangements is, interestingly, to counter China. These prove that ASEAN need not be at the center of everything to ensure peace and stability in the region.

Finally, ASEAN can boost regionalism by seeking dynamics outside the ASEAN framework. If there is one thing that reification does, it obscures actors and processes beyond one's limited perspective. Private governance involving non-state actors can be a way to temper the tensions and de-secure the South China Sea. These efforts also prove that privately generated standards, rules, and practices can go together with global governance.⁴⁵

In closing, ASEAN needs to confront changing geopolitical realities. To insist on the durability of the ASEAN Way is simply to propagate a myth masked as an aspiration. In truth, it only serves as a nostalgic reminder of a time that is now long gone. Yet all is not lost, of course, providing that ASEAN can make some adjustments and accept the historical contingency of regionalism.

⁴³ Mark Beeson, "Asia's Competing Multilateral Initiatives: Quality versus Quantity," *The Pacific Review* 32, 2 (2019): 245-255.

⁴⁴ William T. Tow, "Minilateral Security's Relevance to US Strategy in the Indo-Pacific: Challenges and Prospects," *The Pacific Review* 32, 2 (2019): 232-244.

⁴⁵ Helen E.S. Nesadurai, "ASEAN During the Life of The Pacific Review: A Balance Sheet on Regional Governance and Community Building," *The Pacific Review* 30, 6 (2017): 938-951.



CAMBODIA'S 2022 ASEAN CHAIRMANSHIP: NAVIGATING THE GREAT POWER COMPETITION THROUGH EMBRACING EXTERNAL PARTNERS

Sovinda Po*

** Sovinda Po is a PhD candidate in International Relations at Griffith University and a Senior Research Fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace. His journal articles have appeared in Australian Journal of International Relations, Asian Studies Review, Journal of Current Southeast Asian Studies, European Journal of East Asian Studies, Southeast Asian Affairs, Journal of Greater Mekong Studies, Explorations: A Graduate Student Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, and UC Occasional Paper Series. His research interests include the relationship between China and mainland Southeast Asia and the strategic use of mini-lateral institutions by both major powers and small states.*

Introduction

The current geopolitical landscape is evolving rapidly in the Indo-Pacific region. Features of the security architecture in this region center simultaneously around both cooperation and competition between and among the major powers. Geopolitical competition usually involves economic instruments and has become a defining feature of great power competition in the region. Thus, the rapidly developing security landscape presents an opportunity for ASEAN to better engage with the larger powers, especially in the economic arena. This chapter discusses the relevant challenges and opportunities for Cambodia as the country prepares to be the chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2022. Particular attention will be paid to how Cambodia may exploit the opportunities of external engagement and how it can address the inevitable setbacks that such an opportunity brings.

Structural Challenges

The challenges facing Cambodia as chair of ASEAN in 2022 derive mostly from external factors. Internal unity against potentially turbulent external political conditions is perhaps the key to whether or not ASEAN can withstand the oncoming pull of the great powers in the future.

The most salient strategic challenge for ASEAN and Cambodia as chair is to steer ASEAN through the power rivalry between China and the US. Such a rivalry is becoming increasingly apparent in the military domain. Areas of competition between these two great powers are not only limited to military affairs however. Instead, they cover almost every aspect of foreign policy, including trade, technology, and more recently, the probe into the origin of Covid-19.

Before the election of US President Joe Biden, ASEAN did not experience significant pressure from the US to align with the West geopolitically. Former President Donald Trump was more inward looking and oriented towards domestic political and economic consolidation. His policy orientation was manifested by his intentional absence in various high-level meetings of ASEAN.¹ Despite the fact that some ASEAN members were previously concerned about the US's apparent retreat from Asia, this concern has since faded under President Joe Biden.

¹ Mun, Tang Siew, and Glenn Ong. 20 September 2019. "Trump's Absence at ASEAN Summits Undermines US Regional Strategic Engagement." *ISEAS Perspective* 2019 (106): 1-8.

Unlike Trump, President Joe Biden has taken a rather different approach towards China and Asia. Shortly after taking office, Biden confidently and proudly announced to the region that “America is back”. Thus, senior leaders of the Biden administration have visited or held virtual meetings with ASEAN leaders. In May 2021, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken was supposed to meet with ASEAN leaders, but the meeting was postponed due to a technical glitch. Even though the meeting did not proceed as planned, it at least showed that the US’s diplomatic intentions were back. Subsequently, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman visited Cambodia, Thailand, and Indonesia to discuss many topics with discussions around China on the agenda.

From Southeast Asia’s perspective, recent enthusiasm for engagement by the US is a reflection of the US’s desire to keep China in check. This highlights a significant implication for ASEAN; that is, the US will demand ASEAN to pressure China on key strategic issues. The South China Sea issue will be the highest priority agenda for the US to discuss with ASEAN in the coming years.

On the issue of the South China Sea, the US has always insisted that all parties, including China, respect freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. This seems to be non-negotiable for the US. For China, however, the call for respect for the freedom of navigation is viewed as an interference in regional affairs and a threat to Chinese national interests. In this respect, if ASEAN pushes the call for respect of freedom of navigation, it would likely be seen as an attempt by ASEAN to balance against China geopolitically. As a big regional power, China would not be content with such a development and would likely respond harshly. For instance, it may limit the flow of trade through those South China Sea territories under its control. This could affect some countries who depend on the South China Sea to transport goods across the region. Given China’s leverage over its smaller neighbors, the US has fewer options to make it change course.

At this point, the US views ASEAN as lacking the capability to handle China’s ambitions in the South China Sea. This growing perception is likely to render ASEAN increasingly irrelevant; the US more or less wishes to see a more united ASEAN that can stand firm and strong against China. The resurrection of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad), including the US, Australia, Japan and India, is a direct result of such a perception. While many observers applaud rhetoric that the Quad supports the centrality of ASEAN, this is not the case in practice. Of course, ASEAN centrality benefits the Quad members. After all, most ASEAN members have good military ties with the Quad members.

But the Quad members do not have much trust in ASEAN to remain central and neutral.² Trust deficiency results from the fact that each ASEAN member does not have a common agreement regarding its security role in the region. Thus, the Quad's lack of trust in ASEAN means that major policy decisions will likely bypass ASEAN. The recent 2021 joint military exercise by the Quad members in the Bay of Bengal for instance was conducted without prior consultation with ASEAN, even though it was adjacent to many ASEAN member states.

Furthermore, the US's containment behavior towards China and the Quad itself has raised concerns for China. This has been reflected through various speeches by top Chinese leaders. China claimed for example that this small security bloc is "doomed to fail".³ In addition, it has also warned South Korea that Seoul "shouldn't give up strategic ambiguity" to join the Quad.⁴ China's attitude towards the Quad has clear implications for ASEAN. China's warning to South Korea has sounded the alarm for some ASEAN members like Vietnam who wish to join the Quad in the future. As much as the US will pull ASEAN towards its orbit, China will not stand idly by. So far, China's South China Sea strategy has been to disunite ASEAN members to gain more leverage in bilateral negotiations. It is likely that China will continue to implicitly increase the pressure on certain ASEAN members such as Cambodia and Laos to adopt policies in its favor.

In addition to the politicization and internationalization of the South China Sea dispute, other issues (e.g., the Mekong issue, the alleged genocide in Xinjiang, the Hong Kong issue, the investigation of the origins of COVID-19, etc.) have also been politicized. US President Joe Biden bluntly said that China will face "repercussions" regarding its human rights violations and he further said that Chinese President Xi Jinping knew it.⁵

On the origin of COVID-19, there is an ongoing accusation that COVID-19 was invented in the laboratory in Wuhan, China. However, since very early on, China has rejected this "Lab Theory". The Western countries, led by the US, seem to

² Cook, Malcolm, and Hoang Thi Ha. 17 August 2020. "Formal and Flexible: ASEAN and the New Strategic Disorder." *ISEAS Perspective* 2020 (86): 1-10.

³ Yusha, Zhao. 08 March 2021. "Quad alliance countering China doomed to fail due to member's 'all-for-self' attitudes." *Global Times*. Available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1217756.shtml>

⁴ Xiaohe, Cheng. 11 March 2021. "Seoul shouldn't give up strategic ambiguity over joining Quad." *Global Times*. Available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1218150.shtml>

⁵ Mason, Jeff. 17 February 2021. "Biden says China to face repercussions on human rights." *Reuters*. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-biden-china-idUSKBN2AH0AC>

remain unconvinced. For a long time, the US has called for an independent investigation into the origins of the deadly pandemic. Recently, the US has also garnered support from other like-minded countries in the Western world for such an investigation as well. Discussions at the G7 meeting in June 2021 in Cornwall, the UK showed that demand for definitive answers remains a high priority for the US.

As such issues have already been politicized, whether to support one side or remain neutral is truly a dilemma for many third parties. For now, ASEAN is squeezed in between not only China and the US but also China and the US's allies. In fact, leaders of ASEAN have recognized this dilemma of choice and the worrying trend of great power competition. But one big challenge for ASEAN is how each member responds to this power competition and how much emphasis and significance they put on ASEAN. This means that the unity of ASEAN depends mostly on how each member conducts their foreign policy to secure their national interest. On the ground, bilateral relations of each ASEAN member state with major powers (e.g., the U.S. and Japan) have already created complications and problems for the unity and centrality of ASEAN.

What we have witnessed so far is the fact that Singapore, Vietnam, and, to a lesser extent, Malaysia have strongly embraced the military presence of the US while the rest have been less enthusiastic. This means that despite the fact that there is some demand for greater US military presence in the region, others will likely push back.⁶ This not only creates distrust among ASEAN member states that harms unity, but also presents an opportunity for great powers to interfere. The security preferences of each member state will likely further divide rather than unite them.

Opportunities at Hand

Despite the challenges ahead, there are opportunities for ASEAN to engage many other powers to achieve the best possible diplomatic maneuverability. Besides China and the US, it is worth mentioning that ASEAN has many development and dialogue partners, such as Japan, South Korea, Russia, India, Australia, New Zealand, the UK and the European Union (EU), as well as individual EU members like France and Germany. While the existing partners of ASEAN have played significant roles for a long time, the near-term foreseeable opportunity for

⁶ Emmerson, Donald K. 03 June 2021. "Southeast Asia: China's Long Shadow." *Freeman Spongli Institute for International Studies*. Available at <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/southeast-asia-china%E2%80%99s-long-shadow>

ASEAN is to engage more with key individual countries in Europe and as well with the EU.

Recently, the UK, France and Germany have crafted their Indo-Pacific strategy. Their vision of the Indo-Pacific order encompasses both economic and military aspects. This also means that their strategic orientation pays strong attention to the Indo-Pacific region. It is likely that they will devote more resources in realizing their own vision. For France, the Indo-Pacific is “at the heart” of its world vision that is a “stable, multipolar order based on the rule of law and free movement, fair and efficient multilateralism”.⁷ Now, France is a development partner of ASEAN. Germany has also strengthened their engagement with the Indo-Pacific region and ASEAN. In its “Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific”, Germany pushes forward several ideas such as the EU’s expanding role within the region, the promotion of human rights, the protection of the rules-based order, the strengthening of multilateralism and, among others, the goal of inclusivity with ASEAN.⁸ Germany also sees ASEAN as a region of potential export market value and recognizes the significance of upholding peace and security in the region.

The UK constitutes perhaps the newest opportunity for ASEAN. After leaving the European Union, the UK has recalibrated its strategic outlook and foreign policy, and has paid much attention to the Indo-Pacific region as it seeks to expand its economic influence and maintain military relevance. This aspiration is manifested through various policy documents and top leaders’ travel to the region. In March 2021, the UK published the Integrated Review, a policy articulation of the UK’s national security and international policy. The objectives and strategies in the Integrated Review have been gradually put into practice. In June 2021, UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab led a small delegation to Southeast Asia and met with leaders from Vietnam, Cambodia and Singapore, respectively. While Raab raised various issues, such as trade, defense and maritime security with his counterparts, the visit was also intended to achieve other purposes: namely the support of its membership application in the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Soon after the visit, ASEAN approved the UK’s application to be a dialogue partner. With

⁷ Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs. April 2021. "The Indo-Pacific region: a priority for France. Available at https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/asia-and-oceania/the-indo-pacific-region-a-priority-for-france/#sommaire_1

⁸ The Federal Government . August 2020. "Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific." *Federal Foreign Service*. Available at <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2380514/f9784f7e3b3fa1bd7c5446d274a4169e/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf>

this status, the UK stated that it would work with ASEAN on a wide range of issues such as maritime security and transnational crime, economic development via trade, the Covid-19 pandemic and combating climate change.

Comprehensive Strategic Reassurance and Engagement as a Way Forward

External forces, whether they be political or economic, often do not constitute the principal cause of disintegration for regional groupings. More often than not, such breakdowns are catalyzed by an inability to reconcile competing policy preferences and an underlying lack of trust. This scenario presents an opportunity for the great powers to exploit ASEAN's vulnerabilities even more. To enhance collective spirit among members, ASEAN and the chair have daunting tasks ahead.

For Cambodia as the incoming Chair, reaffirming the ASEAN position by supporting the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific is key. In June 2019, ASEAN members agreed and released an important policy document, the so-called "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific". This Outlook calls on ASEAN to remain neutral and also attempts to hedge against the risk of being disunited and forced to choose between the US and China. However, releasing this Outlook alone is not enough. The Outlook is a policy document that can serve as a tool to express the position of ASEAN. It can be strengthened with supporting statements of where ASEAN stands in the power rivalry.

The reaffirmation of the Outlook is important as ASEAN can use it to further ensure superpowers like the US that the grouping will always remain neutral. Its task is to build confidence with the US which in turn will likely reduce ASEAN's chance of being pressured to choose sides. In this sense, regardless of the security preference of each ASEAN member state, it is undeniable that the US's military presence in the region has contributed to peace for quite a long time. Many countries see the US as a stabilizing force even before the rise of China became a main topic of debate. In this regard, continued engagement with the US in the military sphere remains a crucial factor for ASEAN to maintain a favorable balance of power in the region. However, ASEAN should be cautious not to anger China by allowing the US to play the sole dominant military role. The statements intended to support the Outlook also need to acknowledge Chinese efforts to resolve the South China Sea dispute, maintain peace and continue with the negotiation of the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea. While this reaffirmation is a necessary action, ASEAN can further sustain peace and promote security in the region through economic means. There is a common understanding that economic interdependence via trade will reinforce peace and

security even though it is not fully certain that it can prevent war. But it at least puts more constraints on those who wish to go to war. ASEAN plays an important role in terms of enmeshing all major powers in economic exchanges. Trade is one area ASEAN can enhance economic interdependence. In this sense, forming bilateral trade agreements with key major powers such as the US, the UK and the EU should be a priority.

Creating bilateral free trade agreements with the UK, France and Germany should be a priority for Cambodia as a chair. The ASEAN trade agreement will boost the export of agricultural products to these countries by reducing trade tariffs and export quotas. Such exports of agricultural products is particularly important for mainland Southeast Asian countries (Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam). Thus, it will help to foster economic growth in these countries. This proposal is built on the fact that ASEAN has some form of trade agreements with major regional powers such as China, South Korea, Japan, Australia-New Zealand, and India. This should be a timely proposal given the fact that Southeast Asian countries, as is the case for the rest of the world, are still trying to recover economically from the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, the proposal does not rule out the fact that each ASEAN member can have a separate free trade agreement with the UK, France and Germany. This proposal can be another catalyst for the UK, France and Germany and each ASEAN member state to form their own bilateral free trade agreement. Thus, it can be a complimentary agreement. For instance, Cambodia and the UK are currently, at the time of writing, in the negotiation process of drafting a bilateral free trade agreement. For developing countries like Cambodia, having a free trade arrangement with the UK brings massive benefits to the country. The UK has already implemented a bilateral trade agreement with Singapore. The EU as a group has also implemented free trade agreements with Singapore and Vietnam, and is currently in the process of negotiating with Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. After all, the process needs to be inclusive.

All in all, the way in which ASEAN chooses to handle future decisions regarding these issues will affect the way in which major powers behave. Even though ASEAN has limited power in influencing the great power's behaviors, its own decisions and actions can at least help shape the perspectives of the great powers to behave less aggressively in their zero-sum quest for regional influence. To implement this strategy, unity among ASEAN members is crucially important. This means that the chair will inevitably face the difficult challenge of reconciling the competing interests of each member state, including its own, as it tries to navigate ASEAN through these geopolitically turbulent times.



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ASEAN'S POSITION ON THE SOUTH CHINA SEA ISSUE AND THE FUTURE PROSPECT OF A CODE OF CONDUCT

*Dr. Nguyen Hung Son**

** Dr. Nguyen Hung Son is Vice President of the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV) and Director-General of the East Sea (South China Sea) Institute. Previously, he was Deputy Director-General of the Institute for Strategic Studies at the DAV. His research focuses on major powers relations, regional security governance, maritime security, and Vietnam's foreign policy. As a diplomat, Nguyen Hung Son served as Minister Counsellor of the Vietnam Embassy in Ottawa, Canada (2015-2018) and Second Secretary of the Vietnam Embassy in Stockholm, Sweden (2004-2006). He also served at the ASEAN department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, extensively participating in regional summits and processes. He was a member of the Vietnam High Level Task Force delegation negotiating the ASEAN Charter in 2006-2007. He served as head of the ASEAN Standing Committee division in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs when Vietnam presided over the ASEAN Standing Committee from July 2000 to July 2001.*

ASEAN's Reluctance in the South China Sea issue

The first time ASEAN had a common reaction to the South China Sea issue was in Manila in July 1992, when ASEAN Foreign Ministers issued a Joint Declaration calling for parties to resolve the dispute by peaceful means, without resorting to force in response to China's increasing assertiveness and confrontational approach in the South China Sea. ASEAN was unified again on the South China Sea in March 1995 when the ASEAN Foreign Ministers issued a strong Statement after China erected a structure on one of the features in the Spratlys, the Mischief Reef.¹

The expansion of ASEAN afterward diversified ASEAN's view on the South China Sea, making a unified view harder to achieve. The main barrier for such unity is the fact that several member states are not claimants nor even bordering the South China Sea. On the other hand, all ASEAN member states value their relationship with Beijing and most would not want the South China Sea to stand in between their growing economic and diplomatic ties. A diplomat from the region even observed that "China has very cleverly got every ASEAN country thinking first of its own relationship with Beijing"² when it comes to their approach on the South China Sea issue.

ASEAN therefore wanted the claimants to handle the dispute in a way that would not affect ASEAN's overall relationship with China. ASEAN supported the idea of building a Code of Conduct (COC) with China to create a cooperative framework to manage the issue for regional stability rather than to help the claimants find a resolution to the dispute. The signing of the DOC, the watered down COC, in 2002 gave ASEAN the illusion that the South China Sea problem had then been framed and contained. ASEAN-China relations took off thereafter, which coincided with China's charm offensive towards ASEAN. China acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2003 and became ASEAN's first strategic partner the same year.

Between 2003 and 2009, ASEAN maintained a very low profile on the South China Sea issue. The name "South China Sea" for example did not appear officially on ASEAN's agenda. The South China Sea issue was only nominally

¹ "ASEAN and the South China Sea", Rodolfo Severino, <https://www.regionalsecurity.org.au/Resources/Documents/vol6no2Severino.pdf>

² SCMP Reporter, "Hanoi eyes ASEAN Card on the South China Sea" on 4 September 2010, accessed <https://www.scmp.com/article/710496/hanoi-eyes-asean-card-south-china-sea> on 30 July 2021

discussed under the “Progress on the implementation of the DOC” headline in the ASEAN foreign ministers meeting.

ASEAN changed Perception since 2009

ASEAN’s perception on the South China Sea changed in 2009. After China officially declared its 9-dash line claim in May 2009 and Hillary Clinton, the then US’s Secretary of State, announced that the “U.S. is back in South East Asia” and that the US had a “national interest” in freedom of navigation in the South China Sea the same year, ASEAN started realizing that the South China Sea issue was much more than just a territorial issue between a few of its members.

In 2010, ASEAN responded favorably when Vietnam, the ASEAN Chair that year, proposed to formally bring the South China Sea issue back onto ASEAN’s agenda. While tension in the South China Sea was building up due to China’s expanding claims, many ASEAN members still hoped that an effective implementation of the DOC could help. In 2011, most ASEAN members continued to prioritize working with China to develop a set of Guidelines to implement the DOC, now with a greater sense of urgency.

Less than a year after the Guidelines were adopted, the South China Sea issue erupted again in 2012 when China took de facto control of the Scarborough Shoal. Vietnam’s oil exploratory operations deep inside Vietnam’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) had been the target of several harassment and intimidation campaigns by Chinese law enforcement as well as “fishing vessels”, now commonly understood to be Chinese maritime militias. Vietnam and the Philippines therefore lobbied ASEAN to issue a strong statement on the incident in the South China Sea when their Foreign Ministers met in Phnom Penh in 2012. Although several ASEAN members agreed to Vietnam and the Philippines’ proposal, not all members were convinced of the need to have specific references to the geographical area of the incident, hence no statement was adopted in the end. For the first time in years, ASEAN Foreign Ministers were silent on the South China Sea. However, the “sound of silence” were surprisingly loud and arguably served as a wake-up call for ASEAN.³

Two months after the July 2012 failure to respond decisively, Indonesia championed ASEAN’s effort to regain ASEAN’s centrality on the issue. After

³ “After the Phnom Penh AMM Failure: ASEAN needs to regain cohesion and solidarity”, Tan Seng Chye, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/CO12129.pdf>

hectic shuttle diplomacy between regional capitals, ASEAN Foreign Ministers agreed to a 6 point set of principles on the South China Sea, the clearest ASEAN statement on the South China Sea to date. In the statement, ASEAN Foreign Ministers reiterated the need to fully respect the 1982 UNCLOS agreement, an implicit rejection of those claims not based on UNCLOS, including China's 9-dash line and the assertion of "historic rights".

ASEAN strived to be more proactive on the South China Sea

ASEAN member states had been working together since 2011 to achieve a binding Code of Conduct to replace the ineffective DOC, which were often criticized for not being able to prevent the escalation of tensions and incidents in the South China Sea.⁴ The "ASEAN Proposed Elements of a Code of Conduct between ASEAN Member States and China" adopted in June 2012 was noticeably different in its approach compared to ASEAN's first attempt on the COC a decade earlier. The second attempt placed greater emphasis on handling maritime disputes and incidents rather than disputes over territory, reflecting a shift in ASEAN's perception on the South China Sea issue. The problem that brought down the COC discussion in 2002, i.e., the scope of the COC and whether it covered the Paracels Islands, was not discussed. Instead, ASEAN was focusing more on the common interests shared by all members, i.e., compliance with the rule of law, especially the 1982 UNCLOS agreement and the prevention of incidents that might destabilize the entire region. The blueprint therefore asked the parties to clarify disputes in accordance with international law, the 1982 UNCLOS agreement and called for the proper management of disputes so as to prevent its escalation. ASEAN's priority on the South China Sea thus shifted towards incident prevention and management. The ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Joint Communiqué in 2013 for example suggested establishing a communication hotline, and search and rescue operation protocol for people and vessels in distress at sea.⁵

When China deployed the Haiyang Shiyu 981 oil rig to Vietnam's EEZ in an area of the Paracels on 2nd May 2014, sparking a major incident and a crisis in Vietnam-China bilateral relations, ASEAN, then under Myanmar chairmanship, reacted strongly and almost immediately. Just a week after the start of the

⁴ Ian Storey, ASEAN's Failing Grade in the South China Sea, <https://theasanforum.org/aseans-failing-grade-in-the-south-china-sea/>

⁵ The 46th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Joint Communiqué, ASEAN Secretariat website, https://www.asean.org/storage/images/2013/news/joint_communique_of_the_46th_asean_foreign_ministers_meeting_46th_amm_-_final_-_30june_2013.pdf

incident, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers issued a Statement, only the 3rd such “stand alone” Statement on the South China Sea, expressing serious concern on the “on-going development” in the South China Sea, which in the context of the crisis was a direct reference to the oil rig incident.

In 2015, China’s construction of the artificial islands in the Spratlys at a massive scale and speed previously unimaginable, constituted the latest development in the ongoing dispute. Malaysia, who led ASEAN in 2015, had also become increasingly displeased with China’s encroachment of its EEZ with fishermen and coast guard vessels at its self-claimed Luconia Shoal. A significant development during the Malaysia chairmanship was the elevation of ASEAN-US relations to a strategic partnership in November 2015. In the ASEAN-US Joint Statement, the two sides reiterated their commitment to a rules-based approach in the Asia Pacific, respect for international law and peaceful resolution of disputes. Though it did not mention the South China Sea by name, ASEAN now saw the South China Sea issue in a broader security context of the region and realized that geo-strategic ambition and competition among great powers was a major determinant of regional security, the South China Sea included.

Not seeing ASEAN as a viable means to protect its claims, the Philippines filed a case against China at the UNCLOS Annex VII Arbitration Tribunal in January 2013. When the Arbitral Tribunal’s ruling came out in 2016, several ASEAN members spoke out in its support. Vietnam for instance welcomed the ruling. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Long of Singapore also said “the tribunal’s ruling has made a strong statement on what the international law is”⁶, while the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs called for the respect of “diplomatic and legal processes”. Myanmar made a statement endorsing the ruling as a way of peacefully resolving the dispute.⁷ Thailand also expressed support for the use of every means to address the problem. Although ASEAN did not explicitly hail the ruling, judging that such a statement might be counterproductive, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Joint Communiqué reiterated ASEAN’s joint commitment to

⁶ PM Lee Hsien Loong’s Dialogue at the US Chamber of Commerce/US ASEAN Business Council Reception, Singapore PM website, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/pm-lee-hsien-loongs-dialogue-us-chamber-commerce-us-asean-business-council-reception>

⁷ Myanmar’s statement on the Award of the Arbitral Tribunal on the South China Sea under Annexure VII of UNCLOS, Myanmar Prime Minister’s office website, <http://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=issues/foreign-policy/id-6479>

“peaceful resolution of disputes, including full respect to legal and diplomatic processes”,⁸ an indirect way of expressing endorsement to the Tribunal’s rulings.

ASEAN South China Sea Position after the Tribunal Rulings

Despite constituting a major triumph of international law and the claimant states, ASEAN as well as its member states were surprisingly silent on the Tribunal’s ruling in the months after it first came out. A number of factors could have explained this. First, the newly elected president of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, changed his country’s policy on the South China Sea, immediately played down the tribunal victory as soon as it was announced, and declared he would “set aside” the rulings.⁹ Although President Duterte did not declare an abandonment of the rulings, which if happened would effectively and legally void them, the implication of such a statement is hugely discouraging to other states keen to support the rulings and the Philippines’ cause. But why would other states speak out in favor of a decision whose own author has set it aside?

The second reason is the fear of repercussions from China. The Philippines under President Aquino was plagued by political isolation and economic sanctions after China and his country faced off in the Scarborough shoal in 2012. Singapore was allegedly retaliated against for simply talking about the arbitral tribunal rulings at the non-aligned summit against China’s likings.¹⁰ Thirdly, the other claimant states, including Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei might have been thoroughly studying the arguments and rulings for its legal implications in regards to their own claims in the South China Sea. It is not surprising, therefore, that ASEAN as a group did not make direct references to the tribunal’s rulings, but instead only called for all parties to fully respect the “legal and diplomatic processes”.¹¹

⁸ The 49th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Joint communiqué, ASEAN Secretariat website, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Joint-Communique-of-the-49th-AMM-ADOPTED.pdf>

⁹ Kurt Dela Peña, Why do China and Duterte description of arbitral ruling look the same, report by Inquirer, accessed <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1459119/why-do-china-duterte-descriptions-of-arbitral-ruling-look-the-same>

¹⁰ CLIFF VENZO, “China uses banana diplomacy in Philippines to edge out Japan”, The Nikkei, 26 July 2019, accessed 3rd August 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/China-pressures-Singapore-with-seizure-of-military-hardware>

¹¹ The 49th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting Joint Communiqué, para. 2, 24 July 2016, accessed 3rd August 2021, <https://asean.org/%2Fjoint-communicue-of-the-49th-asean-foreign-ministers-meeting>

Fourth, ASEAN hoped and saw an opportunity to encourage Beijing to speed up the process of negotiating the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. Less than a year after the tribunal rulings came to light, China and ASEAN agreed on the framework of such a code.¹² ASEAN may have thought that downplaying the tribunal's rulings could be an incentive to motivate Beijing to agree on an early conclusion of the COC. Beijing, on the other hand, might have calculated that accepting the Code would nullify the tribunal's rulings after the fact by delegitimizing the tribunal's proceedings. According to articles 279-281 of the 1982 UNCLOS, based on which the tribunal was formed, compulsory dispute settlement procedures could only be initiated after the parties to the disputes had not been able to reach settlement on their own. China might be able to alledge that the COC was such means, although China never accepted the COC to be a dispute settlement instrument in the first place. Or Beijing might have also thought that the COC could preempt attempt at launching similar proceedings in the future.

Developments both at the diplomatic level and on the ground in the years that followed did not convince ASEAN member states to maintain their diplomatic restraint towards China. China continued its militarization of the artificial islands despite talk of restraint in the DOC and amid COC talks. China forcefully stopped Vietnam's oil contract with Repsol in 2017 and again in 2018.¹³ It encroached upon the Natuna Island EEZ, infuriating Indonesia in late 2019.¹⁴ At the COC negotiation, China inserted provisions to exclude external parties from regional resource exploitation activities, and to ban ASEAN from engaging in naval exercises with extra-regional countries without prior consent by China, according to the "Single Draft South China Sea Code of Conduct".¹⁵

¹² Bai Tiantian, "China, ASEAN approve framework of South China Sea code of conduct", Global times online, 18 May 2017, access <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1047662.shtml> 3rd August 2021

¹³ "Vietnam 'scraps South China Sea oil drilling project under pressure from Beijing', South China Morning Post, 23rd March 2018, accessed <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2138619/vietnam-scraps-south-china-sea-oil-drilling-project> on 3rd August 2021

¹⁴ "Indonesia lodges strong protest against China for trespassing, poaching in Natunas", Jakarta Post, on 1st January 2020, accessed <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/01/01/indonesia-lodges-strong-protestagainst-china-for-trespassing-poaching-in-natunas.html> on 3rd August 2021; <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/01/01/indonesia-lodges-strong-protestagainst-china-for-trespassing-poaching-in-natunas.html>

¹⁵ Carle Thayer, "A Closer Look at the ASEAN-China Single Draft South China Sea Code of Conduct", The Diplomat, 3rd August 2018, accessed <https://thediplomat.com/2018/08/a-closer-look-at-the-asean-china-single-draft-south-china-sea-code-of-conduct/> 3rd August 2021

Given the limited effect of diplomacy the COC negotiation had on what ASEAN sees as increasing China's assertiveness, especially with its new found persistent presence at the artificial islands in the Spratlys, ASEAN member states started resorting to legal instruments to strengthen their claims and complaints against China. On December 12, 2019, Malaysia submitted a Note Verbale to the UN Commission on the Limits of the continental shelf, registering Malaysia's claim to the extended continental shelf in the Spratlys areas, in what would become an extensive "note verbale debate" on legal matters pertaining to the South China Sea. As of August 2021, there were 12 countries which expressed their legal opinions through 26 note verbales and diplomatic letters to the UN. Varying in content and topic but all the note verbales, except those from China, reiterated the universal and unified character of the 1982 UNCLOS, rejected claims that are not based on UNCLOS, and reiterated rights of coastal states established in accordance with UNCLOS. Many of the notes explicitly reiterated the tribunal's rulings and urged China's compliance. Of particular interest were China's claim to have the right to draw an archipelagic baseline in the Spratlys on the ground that this was an established state practice.¹⁶ Many countries rejected this idea and emphasized that UNCLOS is very clear and specific on which situation an archipelagic baseline can be drawn.

Stronger member states' views on the South China Sea issue also led to a more solidified ASEAN's position, especially on the role of the 1982 UNCLOS agreement. In 2020, the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting at their Annual 37th Summit insisted that "the 1982 UNCLOS is the basis for determining maritime entitlements, sovereign rights, jurisdiction and legitimate interests over maritime zones, and the 1982 UNCLOS sets out the legal framework within which all activities in the oceans and seas must be carried out"¹⁷.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the COC negotiation process in many ways. After the so-called first reading that was completed in July 2019, ASEAN and China have not been able to jump start the second reading, mostly due to travel disruptions caused by the pandemic, but it may also be due to a lack of confidence in the process from the ASEAN side. The face-to-face Special

¹⁶ China Permanent Mission to the UN Note Verbale to the UN Secretary-General, No: CML/63/2020 dated 18 September 2020, accessed https://www.un.org › clcs_new › mys_12_12_2019

¹⁷ The 37th ASEAN Summit Chairman statement, Hanoi 2020, accessed <https://asean.org/chairmans-statement-37th-asean-summit/>

Ministerial Meeting between ASEAN and China in Chongqing in June 2021 provided an opportunity to resume talks on the COC after a bitter exchange of note verbales the year before. The meeting also took place at a time when China is facing increasing international pressure and criticism over its “wolf warriors” diplomacy, making the meeting with ASEAN all the more important to China’s image.

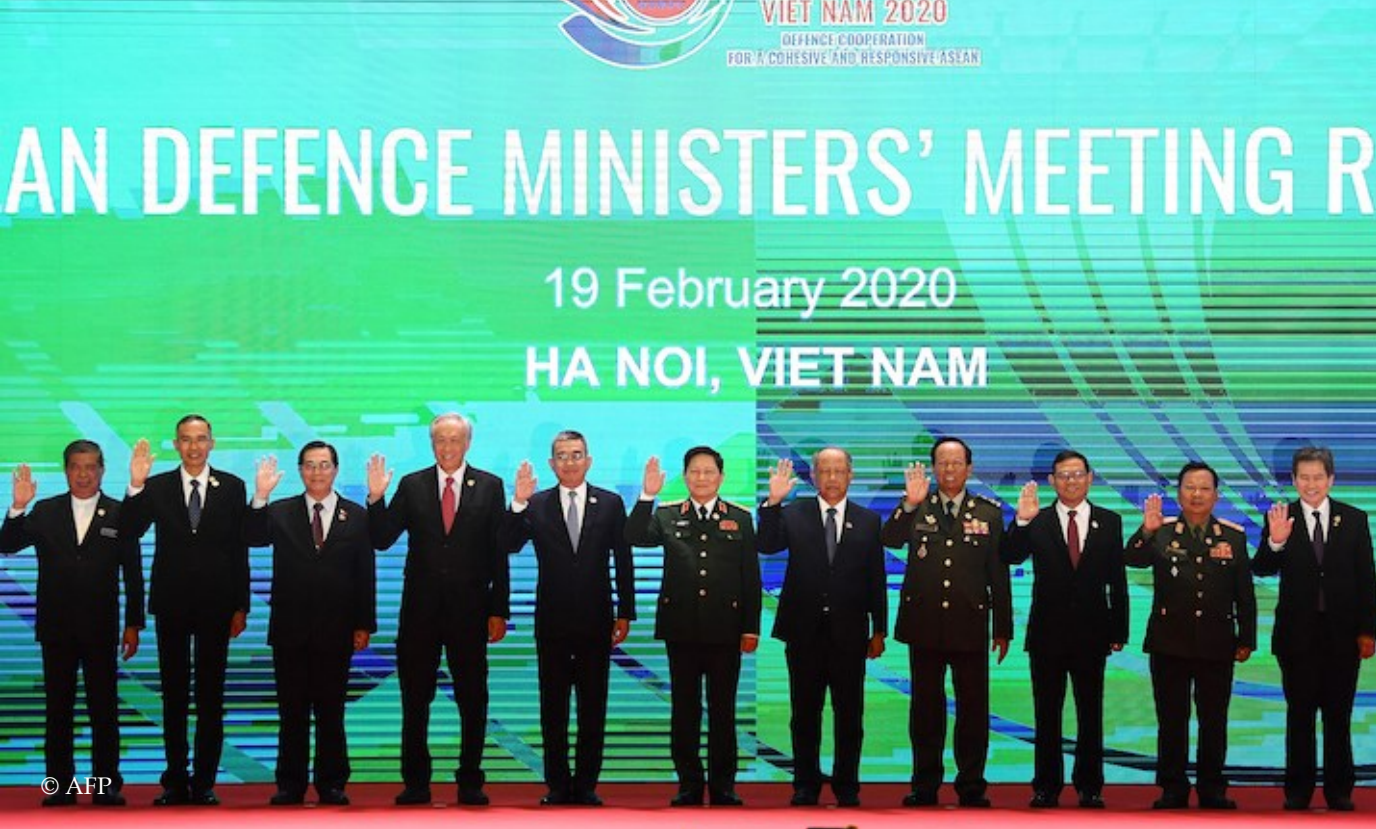
That is why China and ASEAN agreed to resume talks on the COC and China publicly agreed to work towards an “early conclusion of an effective and substantive COC that is in accordance with international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS.”¹⁸ By accepting that the COC should be in line with international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS, China may be indicating a softening of their stance to accept what has always been demanded by ASEAN, but their actions may also indicate that China has become comfortable in its own interpretation of international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS. The latest agreement, however, makes no mention of a deadline or how early the COC should be concluded, contrary to China’s insistence in 2018 that the COC should be completed within 3 years.¹⁹

There is some cautious optimism in response to the resumption of the COC process, and that both sides now agree the COC should be effective, substantial, in compliance with international law and the 1982 UNCLOS, fundamental differences between ASEAN and China on the COC still exist, such as on its geographical scope, on its binding effect, the roles of third parties and compliance clauses. ASEAN also has concerns over how deeply committed China is to the COC at the systemic level, in particular if the COC is to be respected by other powerful branches of the Chinese political system, such as the People’s Liberation army, the coastal provinces, or if the COC is merely respected within the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is believed that without the full participation of these powerful actors, no matter how much effort ASEAN and China spend drafting the COC, the outcome will make little difference to the actual situation on the ground in the South China Sea.

Therefore, to arrive at an effective COC on the South China Sea, political will and commitment must be reiterated from the very top, not only the leaders of ASEAN member states but also from, for once, China’s President as well.

¹⁸ The 37th ASEAN Summit Chairman’s statement, para. 14, Hanoi 2020, accessed <https://asean.org/chairmans-statement-37th-asean-summit/> on 3rd August 2021

¹⁹ [Lee Chyen Yee](#), “Chinese Premier Li says talks on South China Sea code should end in three years”, Reuters on 13 November 2018, accessed <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-asean-summit-china-idUSKCN1NI0B0>



VIEWING THE CONTINUED RELEVANCE OF ADMM AND ADMM-PLUS THROUGH THE MARITIME LENS

Dr. Collin Koh*

** Dr. Collin Koh Collin Koh is research fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, based in Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He primarily research are on maritime security and naval affairs in the region, focusing on Southeast Asia.*

Introduction

It is important to first recognize that Southeast Asia and the broader East Asian area do not constitute a monolithic region. Individual countries attend to their national interests which help to determine their threat perceptions and priorities, subsequently affecting their defense and security policy choices. As such, there has been no prospect thus far in any form of collective defense arrangements beyond the traditional American-led alliances. Even talk about an “Asian NATO” revolving around the Quad,¹ amidst the intensifying geopolitical rivalries – notably the one between China and the United States – is at best tentative and according to some far-fetched for now if not wholly impossible in the future.

Because of the individualistic nature of defense and security approaches in the region, and given the extant complexity of geopolitical rivalries, it would be at best possible to envisage multilateral security mechanisms that are loosely based on institutionalized dialogues for the most part. Specialized working groups tackling so-called low-hanging fruits that usually concern common security challenges, for example humanitarian assistance and disaster relief as well as counterterrorism, can also be created. Since their inception in 2006 and 2010, the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus have held a series of dialogues, established expert working groups, and engaged in limited field training exercises.

For a region that is fraught with geopolitical rivalries and more often than not, divergence rather than convergence in their outlook on regional security, ADMM and ADMM-Plus can be said to represent noteworthy successes in the grand experiment of the evolving ASEAN-led regional architecture. It has kept up-to-date with current events, responding to the evolving security landscape, and perhaps, upholding the idea of inclusivity beyond Southeast Asia to involve key extra-regional stakeholders. In setting realistic expectations for ADMM and ADMM-Plus, it is not presumptuous to conclude that these mechanisms have, to a certain degree, served well as multilateral confidence-building platforms.

¹ The discourse over the recent years has been illustrative. See for instance, Zhang Jiadong, “QUAD desires ‘Asian NATO,’ but China has smarter solutions,” *Global Times*, 11 October 2020; Dian Septiari, “Japan's Suga dismisses concern over ‘Asian NATO’ in Indo-Pacific,” *The Jakarta Post*, 22 October 2020; “Propelling ‘Asian NATO’ beyond US capacity: Global Times editorial,” *Global Times*, 13 March 2021; Nam Hyun-woo, “‘Quad is not Asian NATO,’ White House NSC senior director says,” *Korea Times*, 8 May 2021.

This chapter shall not belabor upon the origins, history, merits, and demerits of the ADMM and the ADMM-Plus (which expands the remit to ASEAN's dialogue partners). These issues have already been extensively covered in the existing literature.² Instead, this chapter shall focus on how ADMM and ADMM-Plus have responded to the evolving maritime domain, which is characterized by a complex array of issues ranging from non-traditional security threats such as piracy and armed robbery, to geopolitical flashpoints in the South China Sea.

Practical Cooperation through a Building Block Approach

Maritime security constitutes a sector associated with specialized, in-depth discussion within ADMM and perhaps more importantly, ADMM-Plus. The fact that maritime issues gained salience in the ADMM and ADMM-Plus lexicon is not a coincidence. The region vests its prosperity largely in the maintenance of seaborne trade plying across the Indian and the Pacific Ocean. The sea lines of communications (SLOCs) that serve as a vehicle of trade and commerce constitute common public goods not just for regional countries, but also the international community at large. Threats to SLOC security range from low-intensity incidents such as piracy and armed robbery, to less likely, high-intensity events such as armed conflict in the region.

In general, regional countries, not least those in Southeast Asia, would rely on two primary avenues to safeguard their national maritime interests over SLOC security – the first being national self-help which is accomplished through one's buildup of maritime forces; the second being practical security cooperation with other foreign governments. The maritime remit of ADMM and ADMM-Plus falls neatly under this second pillar. Practical maritime security cooperation tends towards tackling common challenges in the maritime domain. And this is where "low-hanging fruits" can be located for meaningful dialogue and cooperation within ADMM and ADMM-Plus, especially considering the diversity and complexity of multiple actors with varying and potentially conflicting national interests.

But practical maritime security cooperation itself has to be carefully nuanced within ADMM and ADMM-Plus. Not all security challenges automatically lend themselves to dialogue and cooperation. Geopolitical sensitivities are often key

² See for instance, Hoang Thi Ha, "Repositioning the ADMM-Plus in a Contested Region," *Perspective*, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Issue: 2021, No. 13, 10 February 2021; See Seng Tan, "The ADMM-Plus: Regionalism That Works?" *Asia Policy*, No. 22 (July 2016), pp. 70-75; Siew Mun Tang, "ASEAN and the ADMM-Plus: Balancing between Strategic Imperatives and Functionality," *Asia Policy*, No. 22 (July 2016), pp. 76-82.

impediments to deeper cooperation in this respect, for example, the South China Sea disputes. Transnational security problems such as terrorism would be an area that ASEAN member states and the dialogue partners can agree on. And that conveniently serves as the starting point of practical maritime security cooperation at the ADMM and ADMM-Plus levels. Dialogue initially kickstarted the process, and it took some years before the inaugural ADMM-Plus Maritime Security Field Training Exercise (FTX) was held in Australia in September 2013, the aims of which were said to “promote information sharing and develop a baseline for communications at sea between ADMM-Plus countries”.³

One may argue that the first ADMM-Plus maritime security FTX in 2013 was designed for the 18 countries to gauge the potential extent to which practical maritime security cooperation can be deepened and widened in scope. It helped set the stage and sow initial goodwill for the first major iteration of this initiative in May 2016, when the ADMM-Plus Field Training Exercise on Maritime Security and Counter Terrorism was held. Involving 3500 personnel, 18 naval vessels, 25 aircraft and 40 Special Forces teams from all 18 ADMM-Plus member states, this FTX was one of the largest-ever across the region, only paling in comparison to the Rim of the Pacific Exercise that was held biennially in Hawaii. Singapore, which co-organized this unprecedented exercise with Australia, Brunei Darussalam, and New Zealand, deemed it timely from the standpoint of transnational maritime security challenges.⁴ But it is even more interesting to note that this exercise was only held around two months ahead of the announcement of the arbitral award on the South China Sea following Manila’s legal proceedings in The Hague against Beijing back in 2013.⁵

³ Australian Department of Defence: “Inaugural ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting-Plus Maritime Security Field Training Exercise,” 30 September 2013. <https://news.defence.gov.au>

⁴ Brigadier General Desmond Tan, Director Joint Operations of the Singapore Armed Forces, spoke about the importance of this FTX in the context of such transnational security threats as terrorism. Singapore Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen also couched his perspective of sea lines of communications security within the context of the terrorist threat when he spoke to the press about the exercise. “ADMM-Plus drill timely as maritime challenges galore,” *Borneo Bulletin*, 5 May 2016; and Yeo Sam Jo, “Multinational exercise to fight terrorism and maritime security threats kicks off in Singapore,” *The Straits Times*, 8 May 2016; Iliyas Juanda, “Counterterrorism ops closes regional military exercise,” *TODAY (Singapore)*, 10 May 2016.

⁵ In particular, the 2016 arbitral award dismissed China’s extensive claims in the South China Sea based on the Nine Dashed Line, ruled that none of the contested features constitutes an “island” entitled to its full suite of maritime zones per the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and also flagged the extensive marine ecosystem impact wrought by China’s massive land reclamation activities. See: Permanent Court of Arbitration, “PCA Press Release: The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines v. The People’s Republic of China),” 12 July 2016. <https://pca-cpa.org/en/news/pca-press-release-the-south-china-sea-arbitration-the-republic-of-the-philippines-v-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>

In November the same year, Brunei Darussalam, and New Zealand co-hosted Exercise Mahi Tangaroa, an ADMM-Plus Maritime Security Exercise off Auckland. This was much smaller in scale than the FTX six months prior, involving naval vessels and boarding teams from only Australia, Brunei, China, Indonesia, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, and the U.S.⁶ Nonetheless, this exercise builds on the momentum generated from the earlier FTX in May, and moves ADMM-Plus towards institutionalizing, or at least regularizing, the habit of committing to practical maritime security cooperation beyond just dialogue. These appear to have paved the way for more ambitious undertakings that more ostensibly touched on geopolitical sensitivities to a limited extent.

Notably, in 2018 ASEAN held its first multilateral maritime exercise with China. This inaugural ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise (ACMX) is the first such ASEAN+1 initiative that is outside of the usual ADMM-Plus remit. It was certainly couched within the context of the SCS disputes, even if participants assiduously avoided giving that impression in public. And clearly the ADMM was keen to ensure that ACMX is not to be perceived as “exclusive”, which led to the first ASEAN-U.S. Maritime Exercise (AUMX) being held in the following year. Like ACMX, AUMX is noteworthy more for its political symbolism. According to Singapore Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen, these exercises help to “underscore ASEAN’s unity and centrality in engaging our ‘Plus’ partners.”⁷ The same year from late April to early May, the second ADMM-Plus FTX on Maritime Security and Counter Terrorism was held, involving 19 naval vessels, 10 aircraft and about 700 personnel from the 18 member states.⁸ Additionally, 2019 was a particularly hectic year for ADMM-Plus in the field of practical maritime security cooperation, but this busy streak appears to have screeched to a halt after the COVID-19 pandemic broke out.

Bolder Moves into Unfamiliar Terrain at ADMM Level?

While tackling common maritime security challenges constitutes the key driver of more substantial cooperative initiatives within ADMM-Plus especially, ASEAN member states are cognizant of the potential risks involved at sea that

⁶ Ministry of Defence, Singapore: “RSN Participates in Maritime Security Exercise to Strengthen ADMM-Plus Cooperation,” 17 November 2016. <https://www.mindef.gov.sg>

⁷ “ADMM adopts first multilateral guidelines on air military encounters,” *Bernama*, 19 October 2018.

⁸ Ministry of Defence, Singapore: “Singapore and Republic of Korea Navies Co-Host Maritime Security Exercise to Strengthen ADMM-Plus Cooperation,” 28 April 2019. <https://www.mindef.gov.sg>

could arise from miscommunication and misjudgment. Yet it is difficult for confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) to be readily agreed upon at the ADMM-Plus level, especially if it involves many different actors, eight of which are outside Southeast Asia, with each seeking to safeguard their national interests through various forms of military activities in regional waters.

A useful case study to draw upon would be the ongoing negotiations between ASEAN and China on a proposed Code of Conduct in the SCS. The single draft negotiating text (SDNT) that was adopted in June 2018 between the bloc members and Beijing contained various proposals on CSBMs. A survey of this 11-page document shows that eight of the 11 parties proposed concrete CSBMs, ranging from the least obtrusive of all – dialogues and exchanges – to more prescriptive initiatives such as hotlines, a notification mechanism on military activities, in order to refrain from establishing air defense identification zones. However, some proposals were deemed too controversial. For instance, Beijing suggested that parties to the CoC “shall not hold joint military exercises with countries from outside the region, unless the parties concerned are notified beforehand and express no objection.”⁹ To at least some of the ASEAN governments, this proposal constitutes an affront to their national sovereign right to choose partners for defense and security engagements, besides the obvious agenda of Beijing seeking to use its veto under such a clause to oppose these initiatives.¹⁰

The challenge of promulgating meaningful CSBMs within the CoC is evident from the fact that while eight of the 11 parties proposed such items, all 11 made proposals on practical security cooperation, such as search-and-rescue and marine environmental protection, just to name a few. It appears easier to propose practical measures than CSBMs since they are less controversial and carry less risk of leading parties down the rabbit hole of long-drawn, potentially acrimonious, and inconclusive negotiations over what is allowed for military activities in the SCS.

Hence, while transparency and crisis stability and management ought to have been one of the key areas on the agenda for ADMM and ADMM-Plus, the 18 regional governments essentially face an uphill task when it comes to CSBMs. That is not to say no meaningful CSBMs can be promulgated within these institutions. For example, ADMM-Plus could agree that the Code on Unplanned

⁹ Author’s copy of the Single Draft Negotiating Text, p. 10.

¹⁰ This observation was based on author’s discussions with ASEAN diplomats who were involved in the CoC process.

Encounters at Sea (CUES), a type of non-binding CSBM that aims to prevent and mitigate close naval encounters and was adopted at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium in Qingdao in April 2014, should be applicable across the region. At its first meeting in November 2017, the ADMM-Plus Expert Working Group on Maritime Security agreed on a plan of action to promote interstate trust and enhance security against maritime threats, as well as formally adopting CUES.¹¹ CUES was also practiced during the Maritime Security phase of the 2016 ADMM-Plus FTX on Maritime Security and Counter Terrorism,¹² and subsequent exercises as well as ACMX and AUMX.

ADMM-Plus adoption of CUES and mainstreaming of this operational CSBM into its FTX events essentially builds on a ready-made mechanism already involving most of the 18 countries as signatories back in 2014. It begs the question of whether CUES might be the farthest extent CSBMs can be adopted at the ADMM-Plus level. Nevertheless, it is at the ADMM level that more movements are observed when it comes to CSBMs. Notably, in October 2017, the ASEAN Direct Communications Infrastructure Phase-1 was launched by ADMM.¹³ The ADI, sponsored by Brunei Darussalam, is a secure bilateral hotline between the 10 ASEAN defense ministers and the initiative comprises three phases; the first involving secure voice and facsimile capabilities, while Phases 2 and 3 would involve a form of pilot project and full delivery of secure email capabilities.¹⁴ ASEAN governments certainly look forward to making ADI a more applicable, region-wide mechanism that involves extra-regional powers. To this end, in July 2019, a concept paper on the expansion of ADI to ADMM-Plus was adopted by ADMM.¹⁵

Besides ADI, at the 12th ADMM in October 2018, ASEAN countries also adopted the Guidelines for Air Military Encounters (GAME). The Plus dialogue partners including China and the U.S. agreed “in-principle” to this multilateral

¹¹ Republic of Singapore Navy’s official Facebook page dated 3 November 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/singaporenavy/>

¹² Ministry of Defence, Singapore: “ADMM-Plus Countries Ready to Counter Maritime and Terrorism Threats,” 3 May 2016. <https://www.mindef.gov.sg>

¹³ “Defence ministers’ meeting closes with communications infrastructure launch,” *Borneo Bulletin*, 25 October 2017.

¹⁴ *Brunei Darussalam’s Contribution to Confidence Building Measures in the ADMM Process*, as part of the Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 5 December 2018, A/RES/73/75, at the 45th plenary meeting, seventy-third session of the United Nations General Assembly.

¹⁵ *2019 Concept Paper on the Expansion of the ASEAN Direct Communications Infrastructure in the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting process to the Plus Countries*, adopted in Bangkok, Thailand on 11 July 2019.

mechanism and to explore the collective application of these guidelines by the ADMM-Plus.¹⁶ This initiative notably came in the backdrop of SCS tensions, including a spate of close aerial encounters between the American and Chinese militaries. GAME is a set of non-binding principles governing safe interactions in the air, akin to but less prescriptive than CUES which applies to naval vessels. The agreement to explore an expansion of these guidelines to Plus countries is an achievement in itself, even though three years have passed since and there had been no reported follow-up developments. Nonetheless, at the most recent 15th ADMM, eight new and revised concept and discussion papers, along with one set of standard operating procedures, were adopted, amongst which one was a concept paper on Enhancing Usage of the ASEAN Direct Communications Infrastructure as Defense Communications Architecture, laying out a proposed conceptual framework for Phase 2 of this mechanism's use.¹⁷

Conclusion

The practical security cooperation and CSBMs undertaken in the maritime domain at the ADMM and ADMM-Plus levels are by no means panaceas to the complex and diverse array of security challenges the region faces. While common security threats such as piracy and armed robbery against ships, as well as terrorism, constitute "low-hanging fruits" to foster closer cooperation between the 10 ASEAN countries and eight dialogue partners, when it comes to transparency and crisis management and stability in the maritime domain, there are certainly speedbumps along on the way due to geopolitical sensitivities. Therefore, it is interesting to observe that practical security cooperation tends to prosper at the ADMM-Plus level, whereas CSBMs appear to garner greater momentum at the ADMM level.

Clearly, there are extant limitations to these initiatives. For example, participation in the ADMM-Plus exercises may not be solely out of fostering the goodwill of cooperation; it is possible that member countries could be using their participation in such exercises for the purpose of deterrence, which they seek to achieve through "showcasing" their defense assets and capabilities.¹⁸ Also, participating in ADMM-Plus exercises by no means guarantees confidence-

¹⁶ Ministry of Defence, Singapore: "ASEAN and Eight Partners to Strengthen Counter-Terrorism Cooperation, to Explore Collective Application of World's First Multilateral Air Guidelines Across 18 Countries," 20 October 2018. <https://www.mindef.gov.sg>

¹⁷ James Kon, "Eight new papers, one SOP adopted at ASEAN meet," *Borneo Bulletin*, 16 June 2021.

¹⁸ Tan See Seng, "ADMM-Plus: Can It Do 'CUES' in the South China Sea?" *RSIS Commentary* No. 201, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 26 October 2017.

building among member states. For example, *Lanzhou*, the PLA Navy guided missile destroyer that took part in the 2016 ADMM-Plus FTX on Maritime Security and Counter Terrorism, was involved in a close encounter with the U.S. Navy destroyer *Decatur* in the SCS in late September 2018.¹⁹ And ADMM-Plus exercises are not immune to politicization by member states. Notably, amidst the flare-up in tensions between Japan and South Korea, Tokyo decided not to dispatch a warship to take part in the first sea phase of the ADMM-Plus FTX on Maritime Security and Counter Terrorism that would have taken place off Busan from April 29-May 2, even though it would send a pair of Maritime Self-Defense Force ships to the second sea phase in Singapore from May 9-13.²⁰

Political limitations aside, there are also practical constraints that could limit the extent to which ADMM and ADMM-Plus can sustain the current momentum of activities, especially if that requires participants to commit material and manpower resources. The last ADMM-Plus FTX on Maritime Security and Counter Terrorism in 2019 would be the last such exercise before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, and it remains uncertain as to when a further iteration of these kind of drills will be held again given current pandemic restrictions and priorities. One may envisage a scaled-down FTX involving less personnel and assets going forward.

ADMM and ADMM-Plus are amongst the boldest experiments undertaken by ASEAN throughout its existence. They exemplify the bloc's approach towards creating an inclusive regional security architecture. In view of the evolving landscape of maritime security challenges, ADMM and ADMM-Plus have not necessarily shied away from exploring various solutions, with an eye on practical initiatives that balance against tampering with geopolitical sensitivities. The multiplicity of different actors in these mechanisms would by design make this a challenging process. Therefore, while critics may nitpick at the limitations of ADMM and ADMM-Plus, it is important to remain clear-eyed about what these mechanisms are set up for in the first place, and to carry realistic expectations of what they are designed to achieve, which is none other than confidence-building and, for the most part, cooperation against common security challenges.

¹⁹ Catherine Wong, "US, Chinese warships within metres of collision in South China Sea, leaked pictures show," *South China Morning Post*, 3 October 2018.

²⁰ Song Sang-ho, "(3rd LD) Japan won't send warship to maritime exercise off South Korea," *Yonhap News*, 22 February 2019.



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THE ECONOMIC POTENTIAL AND LEVERAGE OF THE ASEAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY

Dr. Bradley J. Murg*

** Dr. Bradley J. Murg is Associate Professor of Political Science and Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences at Paragon International University. Additionally, Dr. Murg holds positions as Senior Academic Advisor at Future Forum and Distinguished Fellow and Senior Advisor for Research at the Cambodia Institute for Cooperation and Peace. His work, supported by grants from the Social Science Research Council and the International Research and Exchanges Board, focuses on contemporary international relations in Southeast Asia; the political economy of foreign aid; and the political economy of the Greater Mekong Subregion as a whole. Dr. Murg graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Emory University with a B.A./M.A. in philosophy, received a M.Sc. in economic history from the London School of Economics, and his M.A. and Ph.D. in political science from the University of Washington.*

Introduction

Cambodia takes on the chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) at a particularly interesting and critical period in the development of global, regional, and bilateral trade. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), signed in November 2020 by fifteen states (including all ASEAN members) continues to work its way through national ratification processes before taking effect. However, the RCEP through which Cambodia and others will engage with one another is vastly different than that initially envisioned, i.e., absent India, leaving this entity without an economic counterweight to its largest member, China. At the same time, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) has already been in effect since December 2018, with four ASEAN states (Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam) joining. While Cambodia itself has further deepened economic ties with China through the Cambodia-China Free Trade Agreement, ratified by the Cambodian National Assembly in September 2021, anticipating that this will facilitate significant growth in bilateral trade, rising from approximately \$8 billion in 2020 to a goal of \$10 billion in 2023.¹

The change of administration in Washington, with the departure of a strongly protectionist Trump administration and the arrival of a more pro-free trade Biden administration, raises the question as to whether the United States will ultimately join the CPTPP (Japan's replacement for the Trans-Pacific Partnership – TPP), the trade agreement that was initially intended to be a hallmark of President Barack Obama's legacy and cement U.S. trade ties across the Pacific region as a whole). Moreover, while U.S. policy towards China has seen some change in terms of tactical approach, the defining of China as a "strategic competitor" and U.S. policy to date at large indicates that Washington will not be returning to the status quo ante of full engagement with China and will continue to fight its corner, particularly in terms of intellectual property rights protection and telecommunications. At the same time, China's continued economic rise raises the question as to whether the post-Cold War "Globalization" equilibrium is coming to an end and what precisely will replace it, e.g., whether fragmentation into a series of regional trade blocs will occur.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to present both opportunities for the strengthening of trade relations but also serious challenges for the rebuilding of connectivity following over 18 months of closed borders, supply chain delays, and economic decline. The question of economic recovery and the re-

¹ Chea Vanyuth. "Legislature approves Cambodia-China FTA," in *Khmer Times*, September 10, 2021.

establishment of linkages could very well dominate ASEAN's agenda in 2022 – crowding out possibilities for progress in other areas.

This chapter examines several of these issues in closer detail, yet not all of them shall be discussed due to constraints of space. Instead, particular attention will be paid to RCEP, and the overall economic potential and leverage of both ASEAN and Cambodia, including “home-grown” initiatives as well as external partnerships. Finally, recommendations as to key areas in which Cambodia can ensure its chairmanship will leave a strong and positive legacy will be outlined.

Whither RCEP: A Diversity of Expectations

Analysis of RCEP and its near-term implications for Cambodia and other ASEAN member states has varied rather significantly since the announcement thereof in November 2019; but one thing is certain: the sheer scale of the initiative as the single largest free trade agreement in history that incorporates 30% of global gross domestic product (GDP). On the positive side of the ledger, as noted by Yasusuki Sawada at the Asian Development Bank it “will be an important stepping stone toward an open, integrated economic system in Asia and the Pacific. RCEP could further promote trade in the region by strengthening regional production networks through greater harmonization of regulations and policies across its members. The unified rules of origin will likewise reduce export costs within its membership.”² Sawada, while noting various critiques (discussed in more detail below) concludes that while short-term gains will likely be modest in light of relatively small tariff cuts and that 70% of trade within ASEAN is already conducted with no tariffs, RCEP should be viewed as a major step towards the strengthening of an open system for international trade with significant gains for China, Japan and South Korea in particular.³ Petri and Plummer have also highlighted the distinct gains for East Asia (and to a lesser extent ASEAN), noting: “These deeper connections in RCEP are likely to incentivize not just collaborative manufacturing but also interconnected innovation systems, enabling inventions in one country to enter production chains in others. In the best case, China, Japan, and Korea will develop greater confidence in supply chains that have become uncertain in the context of the East-

² Yasayuki Sawada. 2020. “RCEP: What’s in it for the Asia-Pacific?” Manila: Asian Development Bank. <https://www.adb.org/news/op-ed/rcep-what-s-it-asia-and-pacific-yasuyuki-sawada>

³ This point – the focus on East Asia as the main beneficiary is also strongly highlighted in a separate analysis, i.e., Peter Petri and Michael G. Plummer. 2020. *East Asia Decouples from the United States: Trade War, COVID-19, and East Asia’s New Trade Blocs*. Working Paper 0-9. Washington D.C.: Peterson Institute for International Economics

West political divide.”⁴ For ASEAN members, however, they argue that gains will still be significant, estimating \$19 billion annually by 2030 – together with the expectation that RCEP is likely to strengthen over time, noting that this has been a regular trend in ASEAN-focused trade agreements.

This view stands in sharp contrast to others who have highlighted that in comparison to the CPTPP, RCEP does not demonstrate progress on a number of key issues – environmental protection, labor issues, and intellectual property rights.⁵ However, the two agreements are broadly complementary to one another in terms of their facilitation of increased East Asian trade integration and interdependence with the possibility of RCEP members eventually joining the CPTPP and/or moving towards deeper partnerships and the higher standards necessary to remain in step with the realities of contemporary economic development.

RCEP, ASEAN, and Cambodia: Both Sides of the Balance Sheet

In the specific context of ASEAN, Bangha et al., take a much more negative view as to the implications of RCEP over the long term.⁶ They contend that the results of their study indicate ASEAN will be a “net loser” as its balance of trade (BOT) will decline by six percent per annum with increases in imports significantly outweighing increases in exports. Specifically, they contend: “Within ASEAN, BOT deteriorates for Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.” Expanding, they attribute causality to trade diversion as states in the RCEP group shift towards more efficient exporters resulting in a decline intra-ASEAN trade as ASEAN states shift purchasing to China. While RCEP is still in the process of ratification and it is unlikely that significant impacts thereof will be felt during Cambodia’s term as chair, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) will need to consider how ASEAN, as a single community, will evaluate, monitor, and determine its future role in RCEP should the outcomes anticipated by Bangha et al come to pass – after all, RCEP is an ASEAN initiative, initially proposed at the 19th ASEAN Summit in November 2011.

⁴ Petri and Plummer 2020, p. 18.

⁵ Peter Petri and Michael Plummer. 2020. “RCEP: A New Trade Agreement that will Shape Global Economics and Politics,” in *Southeast Asia Insights*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/11/16/rcep-a-new-trade-agreement-that-will-shape-global-economics-and-politics/>

⁶ Rashmi Banga, Kevin Gallagher, and Prerna Sharma. 2021. *RCEP: Goods Market Access Implications for ASEAN*. GEGI Working Paper 045. Boston: Boston University Global Development Center.

In terms of Cambodia itself, various highly nuanced views have been presented taking into account the distinct economic circumstances of the country and the needs of its economy if growth is to be rebuilt and made sustainable in the coming years. In the short term, it was estimated by Bangla et al that the maximum tariff revenue loss for Cambodia was \$334 million a year, a figure equivalent to 1.2 percent of 2019 GDP – among additional downsides.⁷

At the same time, however, Heimkhemra Suy has, importantly, pointed out that the EU and the US are Cambodia's two largest importers, jointly accounting for 70 percent of the kingdom's exports – neither of which are part of RCEP. Of particular interest is the contention that RCEP could be an opportunity to move beyond Cambodia's over-dependence on these markets and provide an alternative path for an economy that has already lost EBA access and for which GSP (the US trade preference system for less developed economies) will eventually be phased out as the kingdom becomes wealthier and more developed.⁸ Suy notes, and this author agrees, that for Cambodia to take full advantage of RCEP – despite potential downsides, it will need to craft a development policy that makes the best use of certain key areas of the agreement – specifically the mitigation of non-tariff barriers for agricultural exports and changed rules of origin; the prioritization of foreign direct investment (FDI) in medium and high-skilled industries; and the identification of “market niches” (particularly in the agricultural sector) to compete with countries such as Thailand and Vietnam.⁹

At the end of the day, with predictions vastly diverging among experts, at least one point is generally accepted: China, Japan, and South Korea stand to benefit from RCEP to a much greater degree than ASEAN. At the same time, ASEAN – with a growing population already over 650 million – will only increase its leverage over time, provided that it is able to act in a unified manner with coordinated policy and strengthened institutional capacity that allows it to reap the gains from its growing economic clout and central locus in both Asian and global supply chains. Finally, as Kazushi Shimizu has optimistically (perhaps overly so) noted – RCEP and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) will

⁷ Sangeetha Amarthalingam. 1 April 2021. “Cambodia, ASEAN Likely to Teeter Off Balance with RCEP,” in *The Phnom Penh Post*: <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/special-reports/cambodia-asean-likely-teeter-balance-rcep>

⁸ Heimkhemra Suy. 2021. “How RCEP Benefits Cambodia in the Long Term,” in *East Asia Forum*: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/02/13/how-rcep-benefits-cambodia/>

⁹ Ibid.

become more important in the context of a global economy marked by rising protectionism. RCEP, at the very least, has facilitated ASEAN Centrality as East Asian economic integration progresses.¹⁰

Covid Recovery: Rebuilding and Strengthening Intra-ASEAN Connectivity for Sustainable Development

While, as noted above, the effects of RCEP are unlikely to be heavily felt during Cambodia's chairmanship as ratification processes continue, it is more likely economic recovery from COVID-19 will take center stage in 2022. However, this does not mean that 2022 needs to be a "lost year" for the development and the strengthening of ASEAN and its role as an economic bloc – far from it. The pandemic has acted as a critical juncture for myriad institutions, opening space for renegotiation and redeployment of existing entities; changing entrenched processes of path dependence by altering interests and feedback mechanisms; and facilitating gradual reforms via a number of different mechanisms.¹¹ This is no doubt also true in the context of ASEAN as an institution. Initial ASEAN responses to Covid and the development of the "AEC 2025" program provide strong foundations for future collaboration and development – however, these can still be further improved upon and expanded.

The COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund, together with the "ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework" and the "Implementation Plan of the ASEAN Recovery Framework", has been argued to be a "consolidated exit strategy from the COVID-19 crisis."¹² Shimizu states: "It articulated ASEAN responses through the different stages of recovery by focusing on key sectors and segments of society that are most affected by the pandemic, setting broad strategies, and identifying measures for recovery in line with sectoral and regional priorities."¹³ Shimizu presents a virtual laundry list of ASEAN achievements in recent years: the ASEAN-wide Self Certification policy (AWSC); the launch of the ASEAN Customs Transit System (ACTS) in November 2020; the signing of the "ASEAN Trade in Services Agreement (ATISA);" the "Fourth

¹⁰ Kazushi Shimizu. 2021. "The ASEAN Economic Community and the RCEP in the World Economy," in *Journal of Contemporary East Asian Studies*, vol. 10:1, pp. 1-23.

¹¹ For a full discussion of the literature on institutional change, see: Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen. 2005. *Beyond Continuity: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies*. New York: Oxford University Press. Kathleen Thelen. 2004. *How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹² Shimizu, 2021 p. 16.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Protocol to Amend the ASEAN Comprehensive Investment Agreement (ACIA)” – ultimately declaring the AEC to be the “most advanced economic integration in East Asia.”¹⁴

In this sense, Cambodia will take on the chairmanship with well-developed plans in place for recovery and solid institutional progress. Yet its approach will require regular flexibility with an eye towards rapid review and revision as the still-unknown dynamics of the pandemic continue to play out, with new variants making adaptation to the “New Normal” more complex.

Concomitantly, weaknesses remain in areas where greater attention is required. Cambodia could take a leading role and leave a strong and lasting legacy for its chairmanship of the region as a whole as well as its own development. Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit has noted several areas of particular urgency.¹⁵ Specifically, the question of supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), as these account for 89-99% of GDP of all firms (depending on the country) and “enable ASEAN to advance the ASEAN Economic Community – a regional economic integration project – in a more inclusive manner.”¹⁶ At the same time, speeding up the process for the development of green travel lanes, tourism travel bubbles, mutual recognition of vaccinations and vaccination procedures remain central. Perhaps most important, as Pitakdumfongkit underlines, is the question of non-tariff barriers, an area that is not covered in RCEP and which could seriously impede economic recovery and the success of intra-ASEAN economic integration: “The number of non-tariff barriers in Southeast Asia rose from about 2,000 in 2015 to 9,000 in 2019. As the pandemic continues to disrupt international economic activities and cause mass unemployment, the Southeast Asian governments are under mounting pressure to safeguard particular domestic interests at the expense of other countries. If left unchecked, these pressures could ultimately tempt authorities to roll out additional non-tariff barriers or employ new kinds of protectionism, hindering trade in the future.” The development of concrete initiatives to eliminate non-tariff barriers (NTBs) is perhaps not the most glamorous of achievements, but one that will place ASEAN on a much firmer economic footing in the future and remove a major impediment to the continued integration of the bloc.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit. 2020. “ASEAN’s Perspective on Economic Recovery,” published in *Southeast Asian Insights*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/12/17/aseans-perspective-on-economic-recovery/>

¹⁶ *Ibid*

Conclusion

While RCEP stands front and center as the leading short-term question for the future of ASEAN's economic development, its immediate term effects are unlikely to be felt during Cambodia's chairmanship. Rather, economic recovery will likely be at the center – however, this need not determine the entire agenda for ASEAN in 2022. The pandemic provides an opportunity to focus on areas – such as the strengthening of the SME sector and the removal of NTBs – that will have significant near and long-term benefits for ASEAN. At the same time, examination of “next steps” following the activation of RCEP needs to be determined, particularly if the direst predictions for ASEAN as a whole and Cambodia in particular are in fact valid and borne out. Cambodia need not cede its chairmanship to COVID-19, but rather, through effective leadership and a clear policy agenda, can work to lead ASEAN out of the pandemic while effectuating reforms and safeguards that are necessary for Southeast Asia's long-term, sustainable development.



ASEAN IDENTITY AND ASEAN-NESS: A CONSTANT WORK IN PROGRESS

*Dr. Geetha Govindasamy**

** Dr. Geetha GOVINDASAMY is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of East Asian Studies (DEAS), Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya where she teaches in the Korea programme. She obtained her Ph.D from Monash University, Australia and M.Phil from the University of Cambridge, UK and M.A from the International University of Japan. Her research and teaching interests include inter-Korean relations, Korean foreign policy and East Asian regionalism. Besides being a member of the Scholars on Korea (MASK) Network and the Malaysian Association for Japan Studies Malaysia (MAJAS), she is also the Managing Editor of the International Journal of East Asian Studies which is produced by the DEAS.*

History of ASEAN

History has shown that attempts at creating a regional institutional framework in Southeast Asia – such as the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) and Maphilindo – were unsuccessful until the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on August 8th, 1967. ASEAN was grounded in terms of geographical proximity and multilateral cooperation by concerned leaders from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines. With the exception of Thailand, unsurprisingly the others were newly minted, anti-Communist independent states which preferred to employ a regionalist approach in tackling security concerns and future economic development.

ASEAN's creation resulted from internal as well as external regional developments that took place in the 1960s. More precisely, managing internal conflicts between neighbors and the fear of involvement by major powers in the region became its *raison d'être*. These included domestic threats such as foreign-backed Communist insurgencies and conflicts like the Philippine claim to the state of Sabah (1961) and the *Konfrontasi* between Malaysia and Indonesia (1963-1966). Further, tensions in ASEAN-Indochina relations united ASEAN's member states in negotiating a political solution to the 1978 Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia; with ASEAN's endorsement, the conflict was officially put to an end with the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements.

The legitimacy of ASEAN in international politics could only be cemented if it represented Southeast Asia in its entirety. Hence, expansion was inevitable to gain acceptance as well as influence in the eyes of the world. By 1984, Brunei joined ASEAN after attaining independence from the British. The end of the Cold War in the 1990s saw ASEAN expanding from six to ten member states: Vietnam in 1995; followed by Myanmar (Burma) and Laos in 1997; and Cambodia in 1999. Their incorporation enabled ASEAN to strengthen itself as a regional organization with a louder voice and greater bargaining power in the international political arena. Although not yet fully realized, the broader grouping resulted in much closer cooperation and a nascent sense of community among its members. With the gradual easing of regional security concerns, socio-economic goals began to take priority.

The Construction of an ASEAN Identity

All organizations consciously or unconsciously possess an identity that helps them to sustain themselves and thrive in the long term, linked in turn to their

evolution, image, culture and transformation. More importantly, organizational identity influences the way leaders make decisions and how others perceive the said entity. “Identity” was first cited in reference to ASEAN in the 2003 Bali Concord II document, but without ASEAN explicitly defining the term.¹ It took another 17 years for the narrative of an institutional identity to emerge. An ASEAN identity was only formally adopted at the 37th ASEAN Summit in Vietnam in November 2020, where community building was at the core of this narrative.² Not surprisingly, the ASEAN identity formation is defined as follows:

“ASEAN Identity shall strengthen the ASEAN Community. ASEAN Identity will enhance common values with a higher degree of we-feeling and sense of belonging and sharing in all the benefits of regional integration.”³

The 2005 ASEAN motto – “One Vision. One Identity. One Community” – serves as the conduit for the community building process. In reality, Southeast Asia is very diverse in terms of its economic development, political ideologies, and the ethnicities and religions of its member states. Therefore, it is not surprising that the ASEAN identity consists of “constructed” as well as “inherited values”.⁴

Constructed values refer to how ASEAN was consciously created in order to foster regional peace, security, and stability. ASEAN has painstakingly and consciously constructed a framework of vision and culture as embodied by the norms and practices adopted by member states as well as external partners. Mechanisms and norms like the ASEAN Community,⁵ ASEAN Charter, ASEAN Way, ASEAN centrality and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) became representations of this nurtured identity.

¹ ASEAN Magazine. (2020, May). Retrieved from <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-ASEAN-Magazine-Issue-1-May-2020.pdf> “Interview with Indonesia’s Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi on ASEAN Identity”, p. 12

² ASEAN. (2020, November 20). *The Narrative of Asean Identity*. Retrieved September 6, 2021, from ASEAN: https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/9-The-Narrative-of-ASEAN-Identity-Adopted-37th-ASEAN-Summit_12Nov2020.pdf

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ It includes the ASEAN Political-Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, and was conceived to reduce poverty and close the economic development gap in ASEAN by 2015.

In contrast, inherited values relate to shared beliefs that already exist in Southeast Asia. Not surprisingly, these include values such as spiritualism, kinship, communalism, collectivism and respecting diversity.⁶ As Farish Noor observes elsewhere, Southeast Asia has had centuries of history of socioeconomic interactions long before the British, Spanish, and Dutch carved up the region among themselves.⁷ It is against this background that the ASEAN community is being imagined – one that is diverse but flexible enough to adapt to changes in the region as well as the world beyond. Accordingly, in theory, the ASEAN identity is very much based on the creation of a community by anthropomorphizing its existing collective heritage.

Apart from understanding identity construction through the so-called ASEAN narrative, scholars such as Albert and Whetten have highlighted three criteria in creating organizational identity: centrality, distinctiveness and durability.⁸ “Centrality” refers to an organization’s important attributes while “distinctiveness” is the extent to which the organization is unique compared to other similar entities. Over time, continuity of key features of an organization signifies its “durability”. Below, we shall see how these three criteria are operationalized.

ASEAN has three key principles in order to advance its identity – especially in the evolving regional architecture. These are ASEAN Centrality, the ASEAN Way and TAC, which serve to boost its centrality outside of the organization. Accepting that community building cannot progress without outside succor, the ASEAN Charter, which came into force in December 2008, states that ASEAN must always be in the proverbial driving seat when it comes to advancing multilateral interactions with external partners.⁹ Therefore, ASEAN has been the “hub” of regional frameworks like the ASEAN Plus Three, the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum.¹⁰ With external powers acknowledging ASEAN’s centrality in regional frameworks, it can be argued that the

⁶ ASEAN, *op. cit.*

⁷ Farish A. Noor. (2020, May). Strangers in Our Own Neighbourhood: Why Southeast Asians need to learn about Southeast Asia, *ASEAN Magazine*. Issue 1, 18-21.

⁸ Albert, S., & Whetten, D. (1985). Organizational Identity. (L. Cummings, & B. Staw, Eds.) *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 7, 263–95.

⁹ Narine, S. (2008). Forty years of ASEAN: a historical review. *The Pacific Review*, 21(4), 411–29; Acharya, A. (2017). The Myth of ASEAN Centrality? *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, 39(2), 273–9.

¹⁰ Acharya, *ibid.*

organization plays the role of a stabilizer and bridge builder, especially between the countries of Southeast Asia and East Asia.

In terms of distinctiveness, the aforementioned motto shows a commitment not only to attaining regional peace and economic development, but also to formally instituting a regional community. However, existing inequalities in terms of economic development between older and newer members of ASEAN complicate the creation of an inclusive ASEAN community. Thus, ASEAN has embodied several key legal and informal norms and practices to promote cooperation, decrease development gaps and cultivate a sense of community within the region. Besides the ASEAN Community, the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Strategic Framework (2000) and its Work Plan Phases II (2009–15) and III (2016–20) were introduced to make ASEAN a resilient community in confronting future threats and challenges in a rapidly changing world order. While the 2015 ASEAN Community is still a work in progress, it does provide a platform for the forthcoming creation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025.¹¹

Finally, durability has a direct impact on the preservation of an organization's identity. ASEAN has been oft denigrated and criticized: Muthiah Alagappa, the founding director of the East West Center's Washington office, previously observed that regional identity in Southeast Asia was somewhat fragile.¹² But today, neutrality and regional solidarity seem to be the most important characteristics which have led to a durable organization. By building a consensual regional order, ASEAN, at 54 years old, has become the recognized voice of Southeast Asia. More importantly, by promoting multilateralism, it has brought external players to work together with Southeast Asian partners. Although ASEAN started as an exclusively regional organization, allowing non-ASEAN states to join its various forums has advanced not only regional integration but also allows the association to have a say in global economic expansion. For example, in 2012, ASEAN member states, as well as some from northeast Asia and Oceania, formed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to stimulate open trade and investment. Thus, ASEAN's durability is not a matter of concern. Despite some differences in foreign policy priorities, no member state has ever left, partly because common regional

¹¹ ASEAN Secretariat. (2015, November 22). *Kuala Lumpur Declaration on ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together*. Retrieved September 6, 2021, from ASEAN: <https://asean.org/kuala-lumpur-declaration-on-asean-2025-forging-ahead-together/>

¹² Alagappa, M. (2003). Constructing security order in Asia: conceptions and issues. In *Asian Security Order* (pp. 70–105). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

ownership, participation, strategic trust and confidence-building remain the mainstay for preventing regional conflicts and inspiring peaceful resolutions.¹³

The willingness of external members to sign on to the TAC, which regulates interstate relations, is testimony to the fact that ASEAN is acknowledged globally as the *only* regional voice. Beyond that, ASEAN's track record of not endorsing collective approaches to security, but instead encouraging noninterference, respect for sovereignty and the settlement of disagreements by peaceful means, has led to a uniform appreciation for the organization's policies. Last but not least, its durability is reflected in the way that it stimulates regional cooperation while still maintaining an independent voice.

The Question of ASEAN-ness

Thus far, this article has summarized the extent to which ASEAN continues to construct a regional identity. but does the imagined ASEAN identity evoke the "we-feeling" envisioned by the grouping within civil society? Although creating a community of shared values is a long-term project, an ASEAN identity is only conceivable with an inclusive ASEAN. According to Rifki Dermawan:

*"... ASEAN has long been known as an elite organization that may be distant from grassroots. As an intergovernmental institution, states remain powerful actors in decision-making in ASEAN. Attempts to include the participation of Southeast Asian civil society organizations (CSOs), however, remain unclear."*¹⁴

It is against this background that in April and May 2020, the ASEAN Secretariat vis-à-vis its Socio-Cultural Community Department began publishing the *ASEAN Magazine*, which is mainly intended to cultivate a sense of belonging to the group of Southeast Asians. One can postulate that the grouping was acutely conscious of the fact that more effort was needed to generate a stronger regional sense of identity and societal awareness of ASEAN's contributions in sustaining regional harmony and economic development. This is not to say that there is a severe lack of ASEAN-ness, especially among youth. A poll aiming to capture

¹³ Marty Natalegawa (2017). The Expansion of ASEAN and the Changing Dynamics of Southeast Asia. *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, 39(2), 232.

¹⁴ R. Dermawan. (2021, August 31). *A Way Forward for The ASEAN Identity*. Retrieved September 6, 2021, from The ASEAN Post: <https://theaseanpost.com/article/way-forward-asean-identity>

awareness of ASEAN among Southeast Asians was conducted in 2018 by the ASEAN Secretariat, with the support of the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund.¹⁵ It was found that 94% of the general public felt a sense of belonging to the ASEAN region. Although most primarily identified themselves by nationality, Filipinos, Indonesians, and Thais possessed the greatest sense of being “ASEAN citizens”. Regretfully, there remained a lack of exposure to ASEAN policies and it was not surprising to note that the realization of the conception of the ASEAN Community and its three pillars remained relatively weak. Subsequently, the report identified a crucial need to effectively communicate the true meaning and concept of an ASEAN identity through more innovative strategies and a multitude of activities. While ASEAN studies have been institutionalized by the creation of an ASEAN Studies Center at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore and the Center for Southeast Asian Studies in Jakarta, such elite establishments create awareness only among regional elites.

Speaking of youth in particular, in Southeast Asia they constitute around 33% of the ASEAN population¹⁶ – thus, ASEAN’s goal of advocating for an ASEAN identity must reverberate more with them than anyone else, since the future success of the grouping lies in their hands. As part of a wider effort to increase awareness, for the 2025 ASEAN Community Vision, Indonesia has stepped up by promoting youth-based programs such as the ASEAN-Indonesia Youth Ambassadors (*Duta Muda ASEAN Indonesia*) and the establishment of ASEAN Study Centres in 68 of its universities.¹⁷ Likewise, Singapore manages the ASEAN Youth Fellowship (AYF) development program, which focuses on public-private sector collaboration in creating a sustainable regional entrepreneurship ecosystem.¹⁸ It also administers the Singapore-ASEAN Youth Fund (SAYF), which allows joint activities for youth aged 15-35 and is designed to promote greater awareness of and closer ties within ASEAN.¹⁹

¹⁵ ASEAN Secretariat. (2019b, December 2). *Poll on ASEAN Awareness 2018*. Retrieved September 6, 2021, from ASEAN: <https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Poll-on-ASEAN-Awareness-2018-Report.pdf>

¹⁶ ASEAN Secretariat. (2019a). *Asean Key Figures 2019*. Retrieved September 6, 2021, from ASEAN Stats: <https://www.aseanstats.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ASEAN-Key-Figures-2019.pdf>

¹⁷ *ASEAN Magazine*, op. cit.

¹⁸ The ASEAN Youth Fellowship. (n.d.). *The ASEAN Youth Fellowship*. Retrieved September 6, 2021, from Singapore International Foundation: <https://www.sif.org.sg/en/Our-Work/Cultural-Exchange/ASEAN-Youth-Fellowship>

¹⁹ National Youth Council. (n.d.). *Singapore-ASEAN Youth Fund (SAYF)*. Retrieved September 6, 2021, from National Youth Council: <https://www.nyc.gov.sg/en/initiatives/grants/singapore-asean-youth-fund/>

To enhance people-to-people interactions and collaborations, the ASEAN Foundation was founded on December 15th, 1997, during ASEAN's 30th Anniversary Commemorative Summit in Kuala Lumpur. Inspired by its slogan ("Think, Feel and #BeASEAN"), the Foundation initiated 20 activities involving arts and culture, community building, media and education between 2014 and 2019. Having connected with 17,000 youth through workshops, capacity building and training workshops, the Foundation has indeed become an integral part of the ASEAN identity awareness campaign.²⁰

To create more linkages and knowledge exchanges with youth, ASEAN is actively employing communications technology to connect with the regional community, utilizing social media in addition to disseminating information through newspapers, magazines, and websites, traditional, as well as internet-based television and radio channels.²¹ Some of these include the ASEAN Television News, the Voice of ASEAN – Beyond Boundaries, ASEAN Data Science Explorers, ASEAN Digital Innovation Programme, eMpowering Youths Across ASEAN and the ASEAN Quiz series. Such interactive platforms serve as a powerful tool for ASEAN to promote solidarity around the concept of a common identity by reaching new audiences across Southeast Asia.

The effort undertaken by ASEAN and member states will not only nurture friendships between youths but will also create networks of future ASEAN leaders who are more knowledgeable about the grouping, bearing in mind that ASEAN can also be defined as a supranational organization which transcends national boundaries and interests. By doing so, the feeling of ASEAN-ness will gain strength over time as a more people-centered, cohesive and sustainable ASEAN emerges. Seen in this context, while Southeast Asians are very much linked to the idea of the nation-state and individual citizenships, the sense of ASEAN-ness can still coexist alongside national identity. But in pragmatic terms, once fully integrated, a more distinctive ASEAN identity and the fostering of ASEAN-ness will result in better access to the regional flow of goods, services, investment, capital and labor.

²⁰ ASEAN Foundation. (n.d.). *History and Mission*. Retrieved September 6, 2021, from ASEAN Foundation: https://www.aseanfoundation.org/history_and_mission

²¹ ASEAN. (2021, September 6). *Information and Media*. Retrieved from ASEAN: <https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-socio-cultural-community/information-and-media/>

Conclusion

Identity formation is rarely static. The slow pace of community identity building can be attributed to the multiplicity of visions and interests of ASEAN member states. It cannot be denied that established norms and values have created a growing sense of community, yet fostering a solid ASEAN identity still faces many challenges. How ASEAN responds to the complexity of international politics, such as rivalries between the major powers, the ongoing South China Sea dispute and the Indo-Pacific concept, depends greatly on just how unified its member states are. At a regional level, the ASEAN Way of non-interference is occasionally at odds with member states' interests, such as rebuking the actions of Myanmar's junta at the United Nations General Assembly and in the repatriation efforts to facilitate the return of its displaced Rohingya Muslim refugees. When an intra-ASEAN consensus is not guaranteed, the promotion of regional identity and unity will also be problematic. At the people-to-people level, the average Southeast Asian will not support ASEAN if their country is at odds with ASEAN's norms and practices, which should otherwise be contributing to regional unity. With this being the case, the concept of a broader ASEAN identity and ASEAN-ness will always be a work in progress.



EDUCATIONAL LINKAGES IN ASEAN: CEMENTING A FOUNDATION FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT

**Dr. Neak Chandarith* and
Sam Ath Sambath Sreysour†**

** Dr. Neak Chandarith is currently the Head of Department of International Studies (DIS), Institute of Foreign Languages (IFL). He is also the founding director of Cambodia 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Research Centre at the Royal University of Phnom Penh. His research interests center on Belt and Road Initiative, Mekong-Lancang Mechanism and state-society relations in Southeast Asia.*

† Sam Ath Sambath Sreysour is currently a PhD student at Department of Politics and International Relations at the University Auckland and a member of New Zealand Institute of International Affairs. She is a former research and project coordinator and of lecturer of International Relations and a holder of M.A in International Politics from the University of Manchester under UK Government's Chevening Scholarship. Her doctoral research lies within Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) as a sub-discipline of International Relations with a primary focus on Cambodia's foreign policy to the United States of America and China.

“Our ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community by 2025 shall be one that engages and benefits the people, and is inclusive, sustainable, resilient, and dynamic.” —
The ASEAN Secretariat, 2015, p.16

Different from the sui generis European Union, the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) carries a distinct “ASEAN Way” of limited institutionalization, which is reflective of its own local historical and political impediments and indicative of both the opportunities and challenges for each year’s chairmanship of ASEAN. As such, dialogues and discussions on this type of regionalization are unsurprisingly dominated by issues of high politics. With an acknowledgment that high politics and low politics issues are intertwined, this particular section of the book seeks to analyze regionalization through the use of a low politics lens. In particular, it will discuss the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community and its educational linkages, along with Cambodia’s engagement. It will then draw on prospects for Cambodia’s upcoming chairmanship of ASEAN, especially in the area of education, using the Royal University of Phnom Penh’s ASEAN Festival as a case study to reflect on a local, bottom-up pursuit of regional identity, peace, and development.

Cambodia and Education in the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community

Over the past fifty-four years, ASEAN has evolved to become a unique consensus-based regional grouping that has strived to become an integrated, peaceful, and prosperous community. While this regional organization does not and will not, in the foreseeable future, incorporate legally binding commitments and mechanisms such as a parliament, its commitment to achieving a united and resilient ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), a highly integrated and innovative ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and an inclusive and sustainable ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) have made ASEAN stand the test of time to become a regional actor attractive to many great powers and external partners. A closer look at this regional organization’s expenditure on projects and programs from 2009 to February 2020 offers an interesting revelation about these three communities and the local needs in this region. Statistically, up to 42.83 percent of ASEAN’s total expenditure on projects and programs is for the ASCC. Initiatives funded by this community range from

capacity development and education to youth exchanges and labor migration.¹ Meanwhile, the AEC has received 39.44 percent while the ASEAN Political-Security Community benefited from a share of only 11.08 percent of total expenditure.² As such, the ASCC is both instinctually and instrumentally essential to the region's development and peace. The ASCC has covered a wide range of areas including culture and information; education, youth, and sports; social welfare and development; women and gender; labor; civil service; rural development and poverty eradication; environment; disaster management and humanitarian assistance; and health.³

Notwithstanding the fact that Cambodia is the latest member of the regional grouping, the country has been active in its engagement. As a matter of fact, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025 is, in many aspects, in alignment with Cambodia's National Strategic Development Plan (2019-2023). In accordance with the ASCC Blueprint, Cambodia has also adopted many national development policies, including the Cambodian Sustainable Development Framework (2016-2030) and National Ageing Policy (2017-2030). Between 2016 and 2020, there have been forty-two initiatives proposed by Cambodian sectoral bodies for ASCC Blueprint 2025 implementation.⁴ Up to fifty-four percent of the initiatives have already been implemented by Cambodia. This implementation of the ASCC Blueprint 2016-2025 has been undertaken by individual ministries, by cross-ministries, and through partnership with external development agencies.⁵ In total, there have been fifteen sectoral bodies implemented by eleven ministries for this ASCC Blueprint 2025.⁶ See Table 1 for the list of 15 sectoral bodies.

¹ The ASEAN Secretariat, *Annual Report 2019-2020* (Jakarta, ASEAN Secretariat, 2020a), <https://asean.org/storage/2020/09/Annual-Report-ASEAN-2019-2020-Web-Version-v2.pdf>

² Ibid.

³ The ASEAN Secretariat, *Fact Sheet of ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC)* (Jakarta, ASEAN Secretariat, 2017a), <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/7d.-May-2017-Factsheet-on-ASCC.pdf>

⁴ Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport, *National Report of ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), Cambodia* (Cambodia, Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport, 2020).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Table 1: List of 15 Sectoral Bodies under Cambodia ASCC

Nº	Sectoral Bodies under ASCC	Government Institutions
1	ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM)	National Committee for Disaster Management
2	ASEAN Committee on Women (ACW)	Ministry of Woman Affairs
3	ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC)	Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation Ministry of Women Affairs
4	ASEAN Senior Officials on the Environment (ASOEN)	Ministry of Environment
5	Committee under the Conference of Parties to the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution (COM)	Ministry of Environment
6	Senior Labor Officials Meeting (SLOM)	Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training
7	ASEAN Cooperation on Civil Service Matters (ACCSM)	Ministry of Civil Service
8	Senior Officials Meeting on Culture and Arts (SOMCA)	Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts
9	Senior Officials Meeting on Sports (SOMS)	Senior Officials Meeting on Sports (SOMS)
10	Senior Officials Meeting on Education (SOMED)	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport
11	Senior Officials Meeting on Health Development (SOMHD)	Ministry of Health
12	Senior Officials Meeting Responsible for Information (SOMRI)	Ministry of Information
13	Senior Officials Meeting on Rural Development and Poverty Eradication (SOMRDPE)	Ministry of Rural Development
14	Senior Officials Meeting on Social Welfare and Development (SOMSWD)	Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation
15	Senior Officials Meeting on Youth (SOMY)	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport

Source: Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (2020)

At the forefront of this Socio-Cultural Community is education. Commitment to education in ASEAN is mainly reflected in the Cha-Am Hua Hin Declaration on Strengthening Cooperation on Education to Achieve an ASEAN Caring and Sharing Community (2009), the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Higher Education

(2015), ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Education for Out-of-School Children and Youth (2016), ASEAN Declaration on Human Resources Development for the Changing World of Work and Its Roadmap (2020), and Charter of the ASEAN University of Network. In this sector, ASEAN has highly prioritized educational linkages, and its regional bodies, such as the ASEAN Directorate and the ASEAN University Network (AUN), have been working on building educational infrastructure for greater integration and alignment.⁷ Historically, the process of regionalization of higher education began in Sweden in 1977 and then spread to Spain, Belgium, France, and the United Kingdom as these countries began to build networks beyond their territorial borders.⁸ Europe's Socrates and Erasmus programs were adopted in the mid-1980s to 1990s for student mobility and were then followed by the more sophisticated Bologna Process, which aimed at harmonizing different aspects of higher education in Europe.⁹ As a matter of fact, scholars remain divided over whether ASEAN's educational linkages were adopted from the Bologna Process. While Sirat, Azman, and Bakar¹⁰ see Southeast Asia's idea of harmonizing higher education as inspiration from that in Europe, Chou and Ravinet¹¹ and Pohlenz and Niedermeier¹² do not see educational linkage and harmonization in ASEAN as an "export" case. After all, while concepts may travel, local conditions should shape and translate the application of concepts and decide which aspects to implement, and this takes shape around the concept of what Amitav Acharya

⁷ Graeme Atherton et al., *the Shape of Global Higher Education: Understanding the ASEAN Region* (British Council, 2018), https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/h233_the_shape_of_asean_higher_education_report_final_v2_web_1.pdf

⁸ Jamshed Khalid et al., "Regional Cooperation in Higher Education: Can It Lead ASEAN toward Harmonization?," *Southeast Asian Studies* 8, no. 1 (2019): 81-98, https://doi.org/10.20495/seas.8.1_81

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Morshidi Sirat, Norazaini Azman, and Aishah Abu Bakar, "Towards harmonization of higher education in Southeast Asia," *Inside Higher Ed* (blog), 13 April 2014, <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/globalhighered/towards-harmonization-higher-education-southeast-asia>

¹¹ Meng-Hsuan Chou and Pauline Ravinet, "Higher Education Regionalism in Europe and Southeast Asia: Comparing Policy Ideas," *Policy and Society* 36, no.1 (2017): 143-159, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14494035.2017.1278874>

¹² Philipp Pohlenz and Frank Niedermeier, "The Bologna Process and the Harmonisation of Higher Education Systems in Other World Regions: A Case from Southeast Asia," *the European Journal of Social Science Research* 32, no.4 (2019): 481-494. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2019.1637248>

calls, “norm localization”.¹³ As such, cross-regionally, there exists an overlapping of goals between the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and ASEAN even though educational harmonization in the latter case is arguably not that of “diffusion”.¹⁴ See Table 2 for regionalization of higher education in ASEAN and EHEA. In ASEAN, student mobility, credit transfers, quality assurance, and research clusters are the main priorities for the higher education system.¹⁵ Since the ASEAN community has a goal of allowing students and staff to study and work across the region, formalized quality assurances and the comparability of qualifications and degrees are highly important.¹⁶ In this regional grouping, there are thirty leading universities that are a member of the ASEAN University Network which engage in academic collaboration and exchanges. The Royal University of Phnom Penh and Royal University of Law and Economics are the only two universities in Cambodia that are part of the AUN.¹⁷

Table 2: Instruments of Regionalization of Higher Education in ASEAN and the EHEA

Regionalisation Tools / Instruments	EHEA	ASEAN
Credit Transfer System(s)	European Credit Transfer System (ECTS)	ASEAN Credit Transfer System (AUN-ACTS), ASEAN-EU Credit Transfer System (AECTS), ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS) & University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific Credit Transfer Scheme (UMAP-UCTS)

¹³ Meng-Hsuan Chou and Pauline Ravinet, “Higher Education Regionalism in Europe and Southeast Asia: Comparing Policy Ideas,” *Policy and Society* 36, no.1 (2017): 143-159, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14494035.2017.1278874>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Morshidi Sirat, Norazaini Azman, and Aishah Abu Bakar, “Towards harmonization of higher education in Southeast Asia,” *Inside Higher Ed* (blog), 13 April 2014, <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/globalhighered/towards-harmonization-higher-education-southeast-asia>

¹⁶ Philipp Pohlenz and Frank Niedermeier, “The Bologna Process and the Harmonisation of Higher Education Systems in Other World Regions: A Case from Southeast Asia,” *the European Journal of Social Science Research* 32, no.4 (2019): 481-494. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2019.1637248>

¹⁷ ASEAN University Network, *ASEAN University Network Annual Report 2019-2020*. Bangkok, Office of the AUN Secretariat, 2020, [http://www.aunsec.org/photo2019-1/Annual%20Complete%20\(Low%20Quality\).pdf](http://www.aunsec.org/photo2019-1/Annual%20Complete%20(Low%20Quality).pdf)

Qualifications Framework(s)	Framework for the European Higher Education Area – QF-EHEA & European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning of the EU (EQF-LLL)	ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF)
Quality Assurance Framework	European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)	ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF)
Convention on Recognition	Lisbon Convention	-
Three Cycle System (BA/MA/Doctoral)	x	x
Shift to (Learning) Outcome Based Education	x	x

Source: Pohlenz and Niedermeier (2019)

With regard to education, Cambodia has highly prioritized learning and human resource development and also highly valued educational linkages within other ASEAN member states. Education is a core element of the Socio-Cultural Community and is also one of the main priorities of Cambodia's national strategy. As a matter of fact, the first priority of the Rectangular Strategy Phase IV (2018-2023) of the Royal Government of Cambodia is human resource development. This priority comprises, among other things, the strengthening of the quality of education, science, and technology. This high priority on education can also be found in many policies, including the Cambodia Higher Education Road Map 2030; the Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency Phase; Cambodia National Strategic Development Plans; Cambodia's National Socio-Economic Development Plan; Industrial Development Policy; and Educational Strategic Plans.

A closer examination of Cambodia's efforts, through its Education Strategic Plans, shows not only its attempts to reform its education system to be on par with other countries but also its particular interest in ASEAN integration and education internationalization. While further efforts would be needed to reach its targets in education quality and international education linkage, Cambodia's existing progress shows its strong perseverance and positive trends. Illustratively, in its Education Strategic Plan (2019-2023), Cambodia's Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport has embraced two overarching policies and set out seven reform priorities in order to achieve inclusive, equitable and quality

education. Its two overarching policies are: “1) Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all; and 2) Ensure effective leadership and management of education officials at all levels”.¹⁸ Additionally, its seven reform priorities are: 1) teachers, 2) expansion of schools at all levels, 3) strengthening comprehensive inspection of school management, 4) the promotion of technical education at upper secondary education, 5) skills education in accordance with the labor market, 6) development of comprehensive curricula and textbooks, and 7) preparation for the Southeast Asian Games 2023.¹⁹ From its progress report on the two policies from 2013 to 2018, Cambodia has made significant progress in, among others, the number of districts with primary education and the enrollment percentage of five-year-old children. However, more effort is needed to surpass targets in the number of higher education institutions evaluated internally and externally.

On top of its commitment to reform, Cambodia has made specific mention of ASEAN in its education strategic plans. This illustrates a high embrace of educational linkages and integration in itself. As Table 3 and 4 below demonstrates, in its Education Strategic Plan (2013-2018) and (2019-2023), Cambodia has explicitly included educational linkages and ASEAN integration. Its references to ASEAN, in particular, illustrate a significant link to its national development, higher education curriculum, quality assurance, and collaboration. An assessment of Cambodia’s international higher education engagement in ASEAN was also made by the British Council (2018) when it examined Cambodia’s existing national policies on education against three criteria: openness; quality assurance; and equitable access and sustainable development of international higher education. As Table 5 shows, in terms of openness, Cambodia has scored highly. This openness criterion has been assessed against how far the existing national strategies support the presence of international education strategy, student mobility, academic mobility, and institutional program mobility.²⁰ Remarkably, as Table 6 shows, Cambodia has also scored high for its quality assurance and recognition. For quality assurance of higher education provision (domestic and overseas) and recognition of international qualifications, considerations were made on quality assurance of international

¹⁸ Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport, *Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023* (Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport, 2019), 18.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Graeme Atherton et al., *the Shape of Global Higher Education: Understanding the ASEAN Region* (British Council, 2018), https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/h233_the_shape_of_asean_higher_education_report_final_v2_web_1.pdf

students, quality assurance of program and provider mobility, and recognition of international qualifications.²¹ However, in terms of access and substantiality, Cambodia has received a low score (*Refer to Table 7*). This score is based on the funding of inbound and outbound student mobility, funding of inbound and outbound academic mobility, and international research collaborations and sustainable development policies.²²

This is not surprising, however, as Cambodia and Myanmar are among the latecomers to ASEAN who need time and resources to bridge the existing development gaps and fund more widespread mobility. But Cambodia's high score on its existing government support system for openness along with its high score on national quality assurance frameworks and degree recognition policies provides the country and ASEAN with good prospects for international education engagement and linkages.

Table 3: Reference to ASEAN in Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018

Page	Topic	Reference
9	Youth Human Resource	Response: increase the enrolment of technical education and technological science. Skill competition, being ready to participate in ASEAN integration from 2015 and respond to labor market needs and increase job opportunities.
11	National Development	In response to the National Vision, the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) 2014 - 2018 makes it clear how Cambodia will respond to ASEAN integration in 2015 and lay the foundations for becoming a middle-income country in 2030.
12	Curriculum	Focus on the quality of curriculum at general education and higher education according to the ASEAN quality standards
12	National Development	The process of ASEAN integration in 2015 and the desire of Cambodia to be a middle-income country by 2030 will require a considerable investment in education. Both professional and well-qualified human resources and financial resources are required (highly successful ASEAN countries have grown in part as a result of the high level of education investment often in excess of 5% of gross domestic product GDP).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

35	Higher Education Collaboration	The Government has recognized the importance of providing opportunities in higher education and the importance of assuring relevance and quality. ASEAN integration will provide opportunities for collaboration between institutions, joint research and quality standard settings.
36	Higher Education Curriculum	Enhance curriculum diversification and priority programs with ASEAN standards (engineering, architecture, medicine, dentist, nursery, accountant, tourism and profession).
37	Higher Education Curriculum	Curriculum development and instructional design: develop curriculum based on labor market needs and focus on analytical skills, problem-solving, group work, communication and indicators for ASEAN priority curriculum standard.
54	Higher Education Quality Assurance	Encourage the establishment of mechanisms and self-evaluation processes among higher education institutions based on the defined standard, especially ASEAN priority programs.
61	Youth Awareness	Creating forums between youth and industries, mainstreaming entrepreneurship, promoting Information Technology, cultural science and sport, promoting awareness and preparing for the 2015 ASEAN integration, national and international cooperation, and building youth networks.

Source: Saori and Takayo (2019)

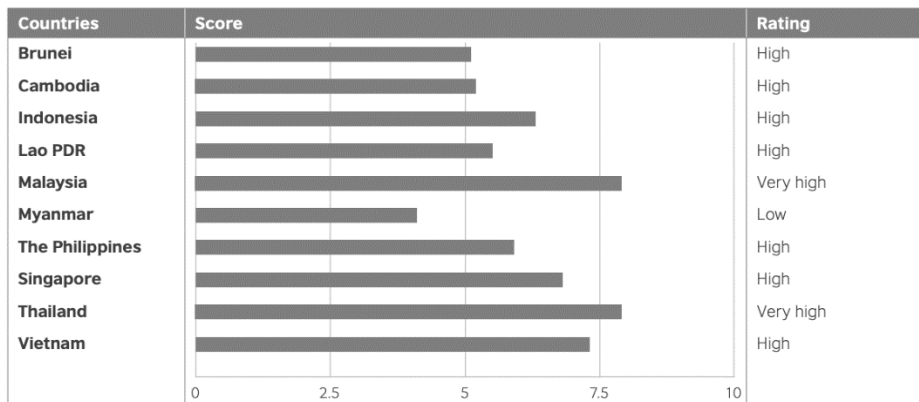
Table 4: Reference to ASEAN in Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023

Page	Topic	Reference
14 & 40	ASEAN integration	-Skills and technology are important to Cambodia's integration within ASEAN. -The integration and the 4 th industrial revolution offer both opportunities and challenges to the higher education sub-sector in Cambodia while Cambodia needs to address issues such as enhancing its higher education quality and relevance.
42	Higher education partnership	To improve capacity in teaching, learning, and research, Cambodia aims to, among others, participate in the ASEAN International Mobility Students (AIMS) Programme.
52, 53, 82,	Physical Education and Sport	- The Royal Government of Cambodia adopted a national policy on Physical Education and Sport Plan in 2015 and has taken concrete actions to promote physical education and

& 111		<p>sport to prepare itself for the 32nd Southeast Asian Games in 2023 and the 12th ASEAN Para Games in 2030.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cambodia has its target to be ranked No 5 among ASEAN countries for Southeast Asian Games. - It aims to implement the ASEAN five-year work plan on international cooperation. - It aims to implement the Sports Action Plan in the ASEAN socio-cultural community.
107	Curriculum Development	To achieve reform on its curriculum development, Cambodia aims to promote the participation of the ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS) program.
14 & 40	ASEAN integration	<p>-Skills and technology are important to Cambodia's integration within ASEAN.</p> <p>-The integration and the 4th industrial revolution offer both opportunities and challenges to the higher education sub-sector in Cambodia while Cambodia needs to address issues such as enhancing its higher education quality and relevance.</p>

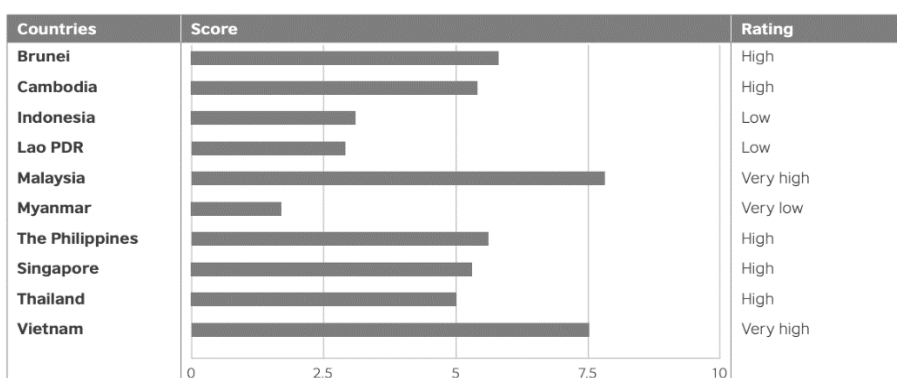
Source: Compiled by the authors and based on Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport's Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023

Table 5: Government Systems Supporting Openness for IHE in ASEAN Countries



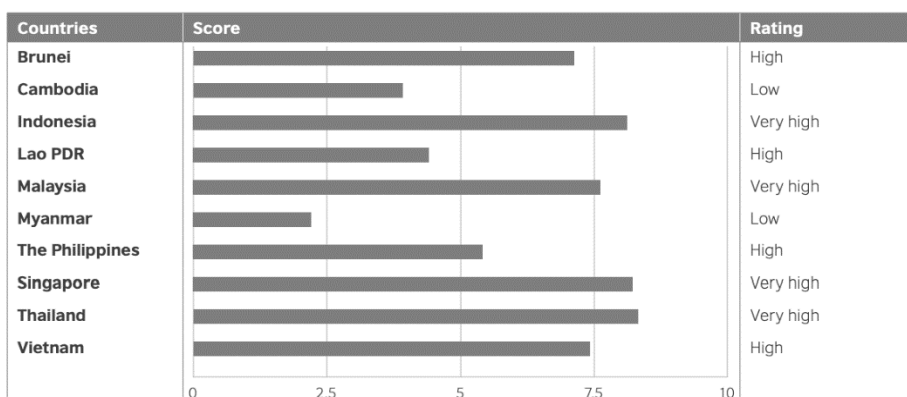
Source: Graeme Atherton et al. (2018)

Table 6: National Quality Assurance Frameworks, and Degree Recognition Policies in ASEAN Countries, in Support of International Engagement



Source: Graeme Atherton et al. (2018)

Table 7: Equitable Access and Sustainable Development of International Higher Education in ASEAN Countries



Source: Graeme Atherton et al. (2018)

ASEAN 2022: A High Inspiration for Education, Youth, and Sport

The “socio-cultural” and “education” variables are essential engines to bridge development gaps, accommodate differences, promote mutual understanding, and drive positive peace and development for the region. By 2025, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community has an aspiration to become a community that benefits people and fully realizes inclusivity, sustainability, and resilience. Progress in this ASCC can be seen in many areas, including extreme poverty

reduction and the growth of the middle class, educational improvement, and the expansion of a skilled workforce to meet regional and global demands.²³ However, while progress has been made, the region also continues to face external and internal challenges. External challenges have included changing global and regional power trends, the U.S.-China rivalry and trade war, increased polarization among states, the global resurgence of nationalism and populism, and the resulting assertiveness and policies of protectionism and unilateralism that come with such trends. These high political issues often have spillover effects on the region and also produce a shrinking space for cooperation on low political issues. Regionally, ASEAN has also continued to face issues of, among others, development disparities, local governance constraints, changing demography, nationalism and populism, a trust deficit among its people, and, most recently, the pressing COVID-19 pandemic.

Even in the area of education internationalization and linkages, ASEAN continues to experience diverse degrees of education internalization among its member states. In line with findings from Atherton et al. (2018), as discussed in the previous section, research results from Khalid et al (2019) also show that the ten member states of ASEAN are at different degrees of demonstrated internationalization practices at the national and institutional levels. As Table 8 shows, while Singapore has topped the list, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, and Thailand are in the “medium” category and the CLMV countries are in the “low” category for internationalization of higher education.²⁴ As an ASEAN leader in terms of education, Singapore has focused on developing itself to become a global leader in the educational market by creating an internationally designed curriculum, promoting intercultural engagement and awareness, developing a competitive edge, and establishing a sense of global citizenship (ibid).²⁵ Different from Singapore, countries in the “medium” category typically only work around the issues of student and staff mobility for their internationalization policies and discussions. Meanwhile, the third category of countries mainly perceive internationalization as improving the quality of academic staff and research.²⁶ As a region, ASEAN has continued to face

²³ The ASEAN Secretariat, *Fact Sheet of ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC)* (Jakarta, ASEAN Secretariat, 2017a), <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/7d.-May-2017-Factsheet-on-ASCC.pdf>

²⁴ Jamshed Khalid et al., “Regional Cooperation in Higher Education: Can It Lead ASEAN toward Harmonization?,” *Southeast Asian Studies* 8, no. 1 (2019): 81-98, https://doi.org/10.20495/seas.8.1_81

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

disparities in curricula and standards among higher education institutions, limitations of financial resources for student and staff mobility, and language differences.²⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic has also worsened digital disparities among ASEAN member states and among their higher education institutions. As such, the whole region has been facing challenges in the area of educational linkages on top of the existing internal and external challenges.

Against this backdrop of internal and external challenges and in line with the aspiration of the ASCC 2025, it is plausible that Cambodia, in its upcoming chairmanship of ASEAN, would continue to focus on the promotion of ASEAN's core values, awareness, and identity, the promotion of human resource development including the empowerment of women, and on the improvement of institutional capacity and the effectiveness of the community so that this regional grouping can deliver its promises on people-centered development, inclusivity, suitability, and resilience. In addition, as the world and this regional grouping have continued to suffer from the COVID-19 pandemic, the high COVID-19 death toll, economic slowdown, and severe impacts especially on disadvantaged groups, the topic of the pandemic, people's health, well-being, and social security or protection can also be anticipated during Cambodia's upcoming chairmanship of ASEAN.

Table 8: Higher Education Internationalization Trends in ASEAN

Country	Trends
<i>High</i>	
Singapore	Increasing public expenditure
	Promoting international academic cooperation
	Emphasizing cutting-edge R&D and innovation
	Emphasizing international profile and partnerships
	Hosting overseas branch campuses
<i>Medium</i>	

²⁷ Umesh Chandra Pandey and Varun Pandey, "Higher Education and Regional Integration in South-East Asia," in *Higher Education Challenges in South-East Asia*, ed. Umesh Chandra Pandey (the United States of America: IGI Global, 2021), 1-17.

Indonesia	High demand from international students enrolling in Malaysia HEIs
Malaysia	Emphasize education quality
Brunei	Lowering public expenditure by shifting cost to students
Philippines	Recruitment of international faculty/researchers
Thailand	Emphasizing international research-oriented policy
	Controlled/limited overseas branch campuses
<i>Low</i>	
	Threat to education quality
	Less access to equity
Cambodia	Lack of human resources and financial support for international activities
Lao PDR	
Myanmar	Limited international faculty and staff
Vietnam	Limited enrollment of international students
	More opportunities for private HEIs

Source: Khalid et al. (2019)

Likewise, in the area of education, Cambodia is projected to address ongoing educational challenges and take the opportunity to advance educational linkages in ASEAN. In these past few years, the most pressing issue facing the education sector has been the inability of students to attend in-person classrooms. The ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic means that digital and distance education has become the only practical mode for schooling. As such, regional promotion of digital and distance learning appears to be a likely topic for ASEAN's discussion on education. With this in mind, the establishment of a regional center on digital and distance education appears to be both necessary and practical in order to coordinate digital education practices among countries and facilitate the delivery of digital and distance education itself. While digital and distance learning has appeared to be the most feasible option during the pandemic, the virtual classroom itself can neither replace the traditional offline classroom nor become a preferable substitute for a physical classroom in the post-pandemic era. However, digital learning can, arguably, be a good supplement to offline, in-person learning, even in the post-pandemic world, as long as it involves digital inclusiveness among the users in question. What has been put under the spotlight for the education sector in Cambodia, ASEAN, and the world, however, is the digital divide that reflects not only a lack of devices and internet connection but also a lack of knowledge and skills to operate such devices. These divides vary among groups and can be based on gender, geography, income, and abilities.²⁸

²⁸ Maida Pasic, "East Asia and the Pacific: Spearheading Digital Transformation of Education," United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), last modified November 13, 2020,

In the short term, to accelerate access to digital opportunities for disadvantaged groups, a good public-private partnership and consciousness of moral obligations to offer solutions to digital exclusion is required. For the longer term, however, in order to reduce the digital divide and digital exclusion, long-term digital and social programs for disadvantaged groups, cheaper digital technology, technological design that is easier to use, and, among other things, better public regulation for the internet is required.²⁹ Above all, there needs to be a consistent effort from state and non-state holders to re-orient their focus and value on human security.

In addition, it is worth underscoring that Cambodia will become the chair of ASEAN during a time of international political, social, and economic turbulence. From great power rivalry to the global resurgence of populism and nationalism, the alarming issue of the COVID-19 pandemic, and loss of household income, ASEAN is facing hard and evolving challenges. In addition, there has also been a need for the regional grouping to address existing socio-cultural and educational issues including a lack of awareness and the language differences among ASEAN higher education institutions. As such, a shared platform to study and address common issues faced by the ASEAN Community is needed to improve regional conditions and promote the relevancy of ASEAN itself. It might, thus, be reasonable to anticipate that an ASEAN Study Center could be seen as a matter of necessity for the region. Achieving a relevant, resilient, inclusive, and sustainable ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community appears to create a need for a study center that would not only promote regional and global awareness and understanding about ASEAN and foreign language studies, but also enhance policy dialogues and generate a knowledge hub.

To further advance higher educational linkages in ASEAN, there is also an unprecedented necessity for ASEAN to promote a dual program in the region. A dual program can help to nurture more well-rounded graduates as they have an opportunity to study in two different ASEAN countries, obtain more comprehensive knowledge and a better set of skills, gain new perspectives, and become more prepared for the regional workplace. Graduates are also likely to have higher levels of tolerance and an ability to adapt to new environments as

<https://gdc.unicef.org/resource/east-asia-and-pacific-spearheading-digital-transformation-education>

²⁹ Jan van Dijk, "The Digital Divide and the Covid-19 Pandemic," University of Twente.
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/The-Digital-Divide-and-the-Covid-19-Pandemic-1.pdf>

they will have experience studying and living in a foreign environment. As Table 5, 6, and 7 show, almost all of the countries in ASEAN have already put in place strong government systems and strategies to support student mobility, academic mobility, and institutional program mobility. In addition, many countries, with the exception of a few, have also had strong national quality assurance frameworks and degree recognition policies. Thus, while challenges such as disparities in curricula and the limited implementation of student and staff mobility remain, it is only a matter of time and funding to address these issues. In this case, higher education institutions that are better prepared, especially those which are members of the AUN, may start the dual program first. Experiences from these early cohorts can also be used to improve the program while more higher education institutions across ASEAN are preparing themselves.

In this connection, to achieve its goals in the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, ASEAN Economic Community, and ASEAN Political-Security Community, it is also crucial to inject an ASEAN curriculum early on in general education across ASEAN countries. To arrive at a common regional identity and achieve peace, stability, and shared prosperity, it is important to construct a sense of belonging to people in the region at an early stage and to normalize diversities among general education students. It is essential for them to be well aware of the opportunities and challenges from this regional integration project while embracing an alternative regional identity.

Furthermore, a close look at ASEAN demography shows that ASEAN is currently experiencing the “largest-ever cohort of ASEAN Youth”.³⁰ Up to 213 million are youth between the age of 15 to 24,³¹ out of the total population of around 661 million. This means that one in three people in ASEAN belongs to the youth category. Thus, uniting them together and making them aware of their potential to cooperate for common regional purposes is important to the realization of ASEAN Community 2025. As such, in the upcoming chairmanship of ASEAN, Cambodia is anticipated to pursue different youth programs such as youth dialogue in order to stimulate youth’s awareness and increase their participation in addressing regional issues. Additionally, sport can be used to unite people and solidify the importance of cooperation. Sport can also instill national and regional pride. ASEAN themselves have also been preparing for the biennial multi-sport Southeast Asian Games and the ASEAN Para Games.

³⁰ The ASEAN Secretariat, *First ASEAN Youth Development Index* (Jakarta, ASEAN Secretariat, 2017b), https://asean.org/storage/2017/10/ASEAN-UNFPA_report_web-final-05sep.pdf

³¹ Ibid.

To date, there have been many top-down regional projects in the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community that have been created to promote ASEAN awareness, raise mutual understanding among people, and unite them together. The following section presents a case study of an alternative bottom-up effort to promote awareness, relevancy, and appreciation of the ASEAN community with the ultimate purpose of contributing to regional peace and development.

The ASEAN Festival: A Case Study of Ideal Public Diplomacy and Public Awareness

The ASEAN Festival: The Why Questions

The first clauses of Article 1 of both the United Nations Charter and the ASEAN Charter pronounce that the primary purpose of these world and regional organizations is to maintain international/regional peace and security. This heavy emphasis on peace and security generates a nagging question: Peace and stability are desirable, but are they achievable? Why have they then not been achieved thus far? What has the relationship been between our approach to peace and the real-world practice of peace?

In the spirit of attaining positive peace and stability and in line with the firm commitment of ASEAN member states to build a strong and inclusive ASEAN community, the Department of International Studies (DIS) of the Royal University of Phnom Penh founded its flagship not-for-profit ASEAN Festival in 2013. As the first of its kind in the country, the festival embraces the notion of multilateralism and celebrates the characteristics and rich diversity of ASEAN member states by engaging ASEAN Embassies and Cambodia's related ministries, youth, public, and private sector into a single "ASEAN Socio-Cultural Village." It was not a coincidence that this festival was created in the early 2010s as Cambodia, along with other ASEAN member states, was preparing for the ASEAN Community 2015.

Three conditions gave rise to the creation of this festival. First, the above questions on peace and stability mirror a reflection on the ultimate subject of peace. As people can be both the ultimate subject and agent of peace, an approach to peace and the practice of peace is perceived to essentially start with people. In this case, a bottom-up approach to peace should be prioritized. Second, regionally, there exist a large variety of challenges to the building of the ASEAN community. The limitation of knowledge about other ASEAN member states and

a lack of understanding about ASEAN as a regional organization as well as its community inspiration. There is also deficiency of mutual trust and tolerance towards diversity. On top of these issues, only a very limited number of Cambodians have the opportunity to travel, come into contact with people of other nationalities, and reflect on their pre-existing worldviews. In this case, while ASEAN represents top-down regionalism, a bottom-up initiative to bridge these gaps would be largely complementary to the community-building effort. Third, a close examination of Cambodia's demography shows that its population pyramid is broad at the base level, implying that the country is largely dominated by young, working age people between 15 – 34. This suggests that a bottom-up initiative can start with youth and end with a large pool of future leaders for this region.

Thus, to bring to the mainstream and further promote ASEAN awareness and common regional values, DIS has decided to create the ASEAN Festival and a series of ASEAN related programs, including Model ASEAN Summit, ASEAN Outreach, and ASEAN Study Tour and Football Diplomacy, on top of its existing numerous ASEAN related courses. The ASEAN Festival, in particular, has stated objectives to 1) Raise awareness, relevancy, and appreciation of the ASEAN Community; 2) Create a platform where people from different backgrounds, cultures, and ages can engage and become exposed to real world socio-cultural diversities and similarities; and 3) Further instill a strong sense of regionalism, multilateralism, unity, and solidarity among regional stakeholders, especially youth who are the backbone of society and the future engines of the region. The ASEAN Festival aimed to contribute to the realization of the then ASEAN Community 2015 and the now ASEAN Community 2025, as well as the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community 2025. DIS has also added another event to the ASEAN Festival, ASEAN Plus Three Festival, in order to promote public awareness and understanding about ASEAN and its dialogue partners, beginning with the Plus Three.

The ASEAN Festival: The What Questions

Functioning as an “ASEAN Socio-Cultural Village,” the ASEAN Festival has been held under the scope of boosting social and cultural exchange between members of state actors, which are representatives and members of embassies and ministries, and non-state actors, which are youth, the public, and private sector within the historic compound of Cambodia's oldest university- the Royal University of Phnom Penh. The festival is envisioned to provide its participants with unique exposure to the diversity of different cultures and societies of the

ASEAN member states and a taste of ASEAN as a regional organization all in one place. During the festival, embassies take part in its signature programs and are assisted by university students, who serve as liaison officers. Programs in the ASEAN Festival cover its flagship ASEAN Country Exhibition, National Cuisine Exhibition, ASEAN Traditional Games, ASEAN Cultural Performances, ASEAN Language Training, ASEAN Documentary Shows, and ASEAN Fun Games, alongside its flash mobs featuring ASEAN related songs and performances. Each of the programs is situated at their own designated location, leaving them spread across the already lively campus which itself is a significant symbol of Cambodia's architecture and higher education. From morning to evening, thousands of participants, local and foreign, experience multi-showcases, engage with foreign counterparts, learn about the socio-cultural features of different countries, experience the true beauty of diversity, and gradually discover an alternative, common regional identity. *Refer to the Appendix for photos of the ASEAN Festival.*

The ASEAN Festival's first flagship program is ASEAN Country Exhibition. In each "house" of the "ASEAN village," there are members of embassies in their national costumes along with liaison youth officers and, sometimes, also members of their local association of foreign nationals in Cambodia. Each country's exhibition booth, or "ASEAN country house", displays a variety of items representing their national identity, culture, ways of life, economy, and tourist attractions. By visiting each house in the village, participants can learn about every country via direct engagement and conversation about the local socio-cultural and economic environment. On top of that, participants can also try on their national costumes and even make-up with the help of trained youth liaison officers, as well as try out ASEAN member states' national musical instruments, some of which are flown from their countries for the exhibition. Visiting one village house after another exposes participants to the richness of similarities and differences between the ASEAN member states.

Another commonly looked-forward-to program of the festival is the National Cuisine Exhibition. Food is an impressive part of each country's culture. To understand one's way of life, there needs to be an understanding, among other things, of their national cuisine. In every ASEAN Festival, national cuisines are displayed, given away, or sold, attracting thousands of participants regardless of age group. By visiting national cuisine exhibition stalls, participants learn more than just the names and tastes of different national cuisines. They also get to learn about each society's way of thinking, their culture and religion, their local resources, and their appreciation of the nation's nature and environment.

Aside from the ASEAN Country Exhibition and National Cuisine Exhibition, ASEAN Traditional Games have attracted thousands of participants not just to watch but also play the games themselves. In ASEAN Traditional Games, members of local associations of foreign nationals, foreign exchange students from ASEAN member countries, or local Cambodian students who have been trained by embassies, come to showcase their countries' signature traditional games. After each showcase, participants celebrate their understanding of the meaning and procedure of games by trying themselves as a group on stage. Through the games and from collective cheers, the participants and audience learn the culture of cooperation and the beauty of unity on top of the similarities and differences among traditional games in ASEAN countries.

The fourth signature and highly popular program of the ASEAN Festival are the ASEAN Cultural Performances. Loved by the crowd, this program features cultural performances unique to each ASEAN member state and also includes contemporary art and music performances. In this program, foreign nationals showcase their cultural performances or local Cambodian students perform after being taught by embassies or relevant stakeholders. Many groups of performers wear each country's signature make-up and national costumes before proceeding to the stage with national instruments to perform spectacular cultural ceremonies or dances in front of a huge crowd. ASEAN-themed songs are also performed to further inject the audience with a sense of comradery. Questions about the performances and culture are often posed to the audience to further check their understanding of each ASEAN country's performance and culture, as well as ASEAN's common culture itself.

On top of these core programs, the ASEAN Festival also features its ASEAN Language Training program and ASEAN Documentary Show program. At the Language Training program, participants are introduced to alphabets and short dialogues in each country's official language(s) as well as relevant scholarship programs. Through this short yet popular language training program, participants are able to have a quick look at the alphabets and language used in each country, get to know and use some short informal dialogues, and prepare themselves for scholarship opportunities which they deem interesting. Additionally, the ASEAN Documentary Show also exposes participants to the history of ASEAN and the history, recent developments, and tourism industry of each country through videos, which are provided by embassies and Cambodia's Ministry of Tourism.

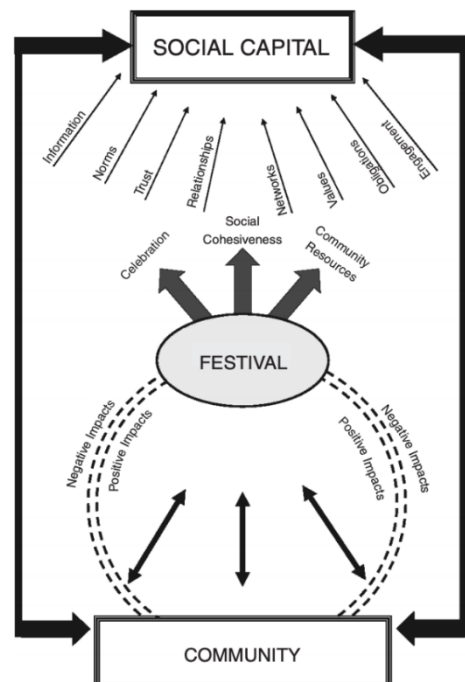
In addition to all of the above features, ASEAN Fun Games is designed to test the knowledge and understanding of its participants through fun and entertaining

games while providing them with additional information about ASEAN and its core values. ASEAN Fun Games generally include best photo and slogan competitions, quizzes about ASEAN and ASEAN countries, the languages used across ASEAN, national cuisines, traditional games, and historical and recent developments in ASEAN. The whole day of socio-cultural exchange and entertainment also ends with a lucky draw in which prizes, ranging from a mobile phone to a flight ticket to a destination in ASEAN, are given out.

This ASEAN Festival, thus, aims to provide a unique socio-cultural exchange for youth and the public. The festival allows its participants to have a short yet exciting trip to 10 different countries in just one day. An even more unique characteristic of the festival however is the fact that it is, from start to finish, run by youth with all of the expenses paid for from funds raised by youth themselves. This inspiration from youth to help others learn about ASEAN and ASEAN member states is a means to an end in itself for forging a common ASEAN identity.

Making Public Diplomacy Thrive: The How Questions

“How can this ASEAN Festival generate impact?” While an event such as this can generally create an economic, political, and socio-cultural impact, this section focuses on the generation of social capital for the ASEAN Community by using Arcodia and Whitford’s model of the festival and social capital development.³² In this essence, the ASEAN Festival can build social capital for the ASEAN community by developing community resources, promoting social cohesiveness, and providing the local community with an opportunity for public celebration and, thus, a heightened sense of belonging.



Source: Arcodia ad Whitford (2006)

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Festivals and the Development of Social Capital

³² Charles Arcodia and Michelle Whitford, “Festival Attendance and the Development of Social Capital,” *Journal of Convention & Event Tourism* 8, no.2 (2006): 1-18. 10.1300/J452v08n02_01

First, this ASEAN Festival develops social capital for the region by building community resources through interaction and social linkages, helping to raise awareness for the ASEAN Community itself. While the festival itself is a one-day event, the planning process, including conceptualization, engagement with stakeholders, and administrative, financial, and logistical arrangements, generally spans over a period of six months. It involves a complex set of actors, ranging from university students, singers, vendors, potential sponsors, as well as members of the diplomatic community, ministries, and associations. It also builds relationships and social linkage between education providers and students who are recruited to execute the project³³, between students and students who co-organize the festival, students and the private sectors who are the sponsors of the event, students and local business who are the suppliers of logistical support, students and a community of artists and social influencers who promote the event, students and embassies or associations who take part in the festival and provide training to the youth, and students and the public who are potential and actual participants of the festival. This complex web of interaction and social networks generates a common understanding about the ultimate objectives of the festival among stakeholders, raises awareness of the ASEAN Community, and promotes common ASEAN values across different segments of society. Thus, these newly established and growing social networks contribute to the development of the social capital needed for ASEAN's community building and common identity. As such, public diplomacy and public awareness about ASEAN among different sectors of society have already been able to flourish even before the actual day of the festival.

Second, the ASEAN Festival develops social capital for ASEAN member states by promoting social cohesiveness, an essential factor in forging a common regional identity, among its participants and stakeholders. The festival brings foreign state actors and a large public together into a single platform through its different interacting programs. Through its large variety of showcases and activities, the festival strengthens knowledge about other ASEAN member states, injects a sense of cooperation and regionalism, and looks to unite and bind the participants together. It is not a coincidence that the festival has been created with numerous programs, as its aim is to allow participants to be able to use all of their

³³ At Department of International Studies of the Royal University of Phnom Penh, a student led organization known as DIS Project Management Team has been established by the department to promote youth initiatives, leadership, and participation in socio-cultural and educational projects. The team has been on the frontline for the planning and execution of the ASEAN Festivals, whose sound achievements are owed to their dedication and self-less services to the community.

senses to see, hear, touch, smell, and taste the essence of other societies and cultures. In this way, the festival is not only a platform to publicize information on ASEAN member states but also a place where participants can come to share their worldviews with their peers and revisit their existing thought paradigms in light of the new knowledge and experience they have obtained. As such, the festival looks to reconcile tension among participants, break down barriers in regard to any misunderstandings, and further promote harmony and cooperation within the community.

Third, the festival enhances social capital by offering its stakeholders a unique opportunity for public celebration and, thus, a heightened sense of belonging. According to Salamone³⁴, a celebration has four main characteristics which are: performance of cultural symbols, entertainment, undertaken in a public place, and community participation. As such, through its multiple interactive and entertaining programs, the festival enables participants to break away from their daily routines, break out of their bubbles, experience a new circle of friends, and socialize under an alternative celebratory theme. Its programs, such as ASEAN Traditional Games and ASEAN Cultural Performances, foster both active interaction and greater bonds among audience members and participants through cheers, laughter, and cooperation/participation. This emotional connection reinforces their sense of belonging to a larger community. As such, the festival may construct a space for them to develop feelings of goodwill and a community spirit.

While many projects are based on a top-down approach to promote regionalism, this bottom-up case study of the ASEAN Festival shows that a local, people-centered community project may also be a practical mechanism to boost awareness, develop unique social capital for ASEAN, and build a healthy regionalism in the future.

Conclusion

A popular Indian folk tale tells a story of six blind men and one elephant. As the blind men touch different parts of the elephant, they construct a different reality of what an elephant is. Thus, to construct a better understanding of what an elephant really is, it is necessary to touch as many parts of the elephant as possible. In line with this analogy, to construct a people-centered ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community that is inclusive, sustainable, resilient, and dynamic, it is necessary for people in ASEAN to, first, form a basic common and mutual

³⁴ Salamone (2000), as cited in Arcodia and Whitford, 2006.

understanding. ASEAN educational linkages are capable of facilitating this formation process. While ASEAN, through different rounds of chairmanship, works to reinforce the development of regional education linkages and the socio-cultural community in order to achieve regional progress and development, local bottom-up initiatives may also, in their own capacity, contribute to the regional effort.

APPENDIX



Cambodia's Minister of Education and his distinguished representative presided over an opening ceremony of the ASEAN Festival 2015 and ASEAN Plus Three Festival 2017 at the Royal University of Phnom Penh. As a symbol of beauty and unity in diversity, they took an honorable visit to this ASEAN Socio-Cultural Village and altogether joined a photo session at the village filled with ASEAN theme songs and performances.



Opening ceremony of the ASEAN Festival 2015 and ASEAN Plus Three Festival 2017 at the Royal University of Phnom Penh.





Ambassadors and distinguished representatives of ASEAN/ASEAN Plus Three member states presided over an opening ceremony of the ASEAN Festival 2015 and ASEAN Plus Three Festival 2017 at the Royal University of Phnom Penh.







ASEAN Cultural Performances at ASEAN Festival 2015 and ASEAN Plus Three Festival 2017. Performers were local students who had been trained by respective embassies/associations on their national performances.





THE NETWORK OF ASEAN- CHINA THINK TANK (NACT): ACHIEVEMENTS AND WAYS FORWARD

Dr. Yang Yue* and Dr. Li Fujian†

** Dr. Yang Ye, Deputy Director and Associate Professor of the Institute of Asian Studies, China Foreign Affairs University*

† Dr. Li Fujian, Research Fellow, China Foreign Affairs University; and Coordinator of the Network of ASEAN-China Think Tank

Background

Since the establishment of China-ASEAN Dialogue Relations in the early 1990s, China and ASEAN relations have undergone a historical leap, from comprehensive dialogue to strategic partnership with broad common interests. As of 2013, the China-ASEAN strategic partnership had experienced a “Golden Decade” of cooperation in various fields.

As a good neighbor, friend, and partner of ASEAN, China regards ASEAN countries as a priority in terms of its neighborhood diplomacy, and firmly seeks to develop good cooperative ties with ASEAN. In fact, the importance of China-ASEAN cooperation has gone beyond bilateral relations and the relationship has increasingly become a cornerstone of regional peace, stability, and prosperity.

To further strengthen the China-ASEAN strategic partnership, Wen Jiabao, then Premier of the State Council of China, formally put forward an important initiative to establish a Network of ASEAN-China think tanks (hereinafter referred to as NACT) at the 15th China-ASEAN Summit in 2012. At the “Conference on Celebrating the 10th Anniversary of ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations” in July 2013, China and ASEAN countries agreed to build NACT, with the Institute of Asian Studies of China Foreign Affairs University designated as the Country Coordinator. At the 10th China-ASEAN Expo and China-ASEAN Business and Investment Summit in September 2013, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang proposed that NACT play an active role in further deepening the China-ASEAN strategic partnership. After nearly a year of preparation, on July 3, 2014, the first NACT Country Coordinators Meeting was held in Beijing with ten ASEAN countries. The meeting agreed on a NACT concept paper, with participants reaching a consensus on the purpose and objectives, operating mechanisms, membership, and funding rules before officially launching the Network.

The purpose of NACT is to enhance mutual trust and understanding between ASEAN and China, especially in academic circles and think tanks; provide important intellectual support for the in-depth development of China-ASEAN relations; strengthen exchange and cooperation between ASEAN member states and Chinese academic research institutions; further develop China-ASEAN strategic partnership; and optimize and supplement the existing think tank networks in the region, including the Network of East Asian think tanks (NEAT). NACT provides a platform for China and ASEAN think tanks to carry out cooperation in joint research and scholarly exchange. The areas of cooperation



include non-governmental exchange, tourism, education, e-commerce, energy, connectivity, environmental protection, poverty reduction, labor development, digital platform management, and others. The research outcomes are submitted to the annual China-ASEAN Summit to support the China-ASEAN strategic partnership, to build a China-ASEAN community with a shared future, and to contribute to the in-depth development of China-ASEAN relations.

The Development of NACT

NACT has continuously improved its operating procedures, whose primary objectives are to carry out joint research, promote the in-depth development of China-ASEAN relations, and play an important role in regional cooperation. In just over a year, NACT has made important progress, including the establishment of a three-level working mechanism for the Country Coordinators' Meeting, Working Group Meeting, and Annual Conference.

The Country Coordinators' Meeting is NACT's highest decision-making body and is co-chaired by China and one ASEAN country on a revolving basis. Decisions are made based on consensus. The main content of the meeting includes a summary and review of NACT's work in the previous year, discussions and arrangements on the topics of next year's plan, the working group's research plan, and the rotating ASEAN chairmanship.

On July 3, 2014, the first NACT Country Coordinators' Meeting was held in Beijing. Participants reached a consensus on the purpose, objectives, operating procedures, membership, and funding of NACT. On July 4, the NACT Annual Conference was officially held, with participating representatives including nearly 100 officials, businessmen, and scholars from China and the ten ASEAN countries. Participants discussed the concept of building China-ASEAN community with a shared future on three aspects: political-security, economic, and socio-cultural exchange. NACT has therefore made a good start in terms of building additional channels for greater China-ASEAN dialogue.

From November 16-17, 2015, the second NACT Country Coordinators' Meeting and Annual Conference on China-ASEAN Relations was held. The participants discussed the "NACT Concept Paper", mechanism construction, and work plans, completing all the set-tasks. NACT adheres to a pragmatic, efficient, and problem-solving oriented approach, while also conducting joint research closely around the key areas of China-ASEAN cooperation. Since 2016, it has set up working groups on people-to-people exchange, e-commerce cooperation, partnerships for sustainable and inclusive development, poverty reduction in the context of COVID-19, regional cooperation on digital platforms, vaccine cooperation and green lanes. These research results are timely, forward-looking and operable suggestions for the future development of China-ASEAN relations.

In recent years, NACT has continuously innovated its procedures and achieved remarkable results. For the first time in 2019, the timing of NACT meetings was adjusted to keep pace with official meetings at all levels, which further guarantees the timeliness of research results.

As of August 2021, NACT has held seven Country Coordinators meetings, seven Annual Conferences, and fifteen working group meetings, as listed in *Appendix II*.

Major Accomplishments

NACT conducts two-three joint working group studies and convenes working group meetings every year. It invites experts and scholars from China and ASEAN Member States to carry out in-depth research on key issues in China-ASEAN relations and offers practical and feasible policy recommendations. Any consensus reached during the meetings is then submitted to the decision-making bodies of ASEAN-China governments. The topics of the working groups cover various aspects of the China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership.

1. Deepening the Strategic Partnership

In 2016, NACT established the first working group “ASEAN and China: Deepening the Strategic Partnership in Commemoration of the 25th Anniversary of ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations”. During the first meeting of the working group, the participants discussed four topics: “Overall review of China-ASEAN relations”; “The Belt and Road Initiative and economic cooperation”; “From confidence building to strategic trust”; and “Cultivating personal connections”. The second meeting was held in the same year, with themes including “Overall review of China-ASEAN relations”; “From confidence building to common security”; “New progress in ASEAN-China cooperation under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative”; and “Social and cultural exchanges.”

2. People-to-People Exchange

In order to implement the important initiative of “forging a new pillar of people-to-people and cultural exchange and cooperation” proposed by Premier Li Keqiang when attending the 19th China-ASEAN Summit, NACT established the People-to-People Exchange and Cooperation Working Group in 2017 which carried out research focusing on three themes: cultural cooperation, tourism cooperation and education cooperation.

On May 16, the NACT Working Group Meeting on “Promoting People-to-People Exchanges between ASEAN and China through Cultural Cooperation” took place in Guiyang, Guizhou province. The theme of the meeting was China-ASEAN cultural cooperation, with the purpose of exploring how China can help to build a China-ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. Four topics, including “Achievements and challenges in China-ASEAN cultural cooperation”; “The implementation of The Plan of Action (POA) on ASEAN-China Cultural Cooperation (2014-2018) and a new five-year plan of cultural cooperation in the post-2018 era”; “ASEAN socio-cultural community construction and China’s role”; and “Specific cooperation areas” were discussed in-depth by the representatives.

On June 6, the NACT Working Group Meeting on “Promoting People-to-People Exchanges between ASEAN and China through Tourism Cooperation” was held in Vientiane, Laos. Officials and scholars from the ten ASEAN Member States and China conducted candid, in-depth discussions around four agendas: “Achievements and challenges on tourism cooperation between ASEAN and China”; “Building integrated tourist sites and ensuring sustainable

development”; “Aligning the existing regional initiatives of tourism between ASEAN and China to promote the implementation of the ASEAN tourism strategic plan 2016-2025”; and “Dimension of tourist cooperation that can help expedite regional integration”.

The NACT Working Group Meeting on Educational Cooperation was successfully held in Singapore on June 9. Participants shared their experience in international education cooperation, conducted an in-depth analysis on the importance of education cooperation and the opportunities and challenges ahead of China-ASEAN education cooperation, and put forward long-term, feasible policy recommendations.

3. ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership Vision 2030

2018 marked the 15th anniversary of the China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership. China-ASEAN relations were then at a stage in which they could benefit from additional improvement. NACT held two important working group meetings in Beijing and Singapore separately. In order to implement the important initiative of 2030 Vision for China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership (hereinafter referred to as 2030 Vision) put forward by Premier Li Keqiang when attending the 20th China-ASEAN Summit, the Institute of Asian Studies of China Foreign Affairs University held the NACT Special Working Group Meeting on 2030 Vision for ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership in Beijing on January 26, 2018.



This meeting systematically reviewed and evaluated the existing cooperation framework in specific areas between China and ASEAN. The connotations and main objectives of the China-ASEAN strategic partnership were clearly defined and clarified. The experts from China and ASEAN conducted in-depth studies on the alignment between the “Vision 2030” and development strategies such as the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It also proposed specific goals for cooperation in the three pillars of political-security, economic development, and cultural exchange. Representatives at the meeting agreed that the China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership effectively promoted the economic and social development of both sides over the past 15 years, and has made important contributions to regional peace, stability, and prosperity. It is of historical significance for the leaders of China and ASEAN Member States to push Vision 2030 and design a blueprint for future development. This will play an important role in paving the way for the sustainable development of good bilateral relations, as well as better global and regional governance.

4. E-Commerce Cooperation

China and ASEAN Member States have all recognized the importance of e-commerce as an engine for innovation-driven growth. To have a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the e-commerce development of ASEAN Member States and China, NACT summarized past achievements and challenges in future development, as well as making suggestions for the future growth of the industry.

On July 6, 2018, NACT established the E-commerce Cooperation Working Group and held a working group meeting in Singapore. The NACT working group realized that e-commerce was still a relatively underdeveloped sector and stressed the need to work together to take advantage of its potential. At the meeting, the working group put forward several ideas and suggestions. For instance, China and ASEAN countries would co-organize and co-support the establishment of an ASEAN-China E-commerce Promotion Association, a China-ASEAN E-commerce University, a China-ASEAN E-commerce research center, the China-ASEAN E-commerce and Digital Economy Development Fund, the China-ASEAN E-commerce Entrepreneurship Start-up Centre, and complete and sign regional cooperation agreements such as the ASEAN Agreement on E-commerce and the ASEAN Digital Integration Framework. Policy recommendations from the working group have proved to be an important reference for governments on the formulation of specific cooperation plans,

highlighting the key role of NACT in forging deeper China-ASEAN relations. In addition, the e-commerce cooperation working group has directly promoted the establishment of the China-ASEAN E-Commerce Promotion Association in Singapore.

5. Sustainable and Inclusive Development

NACT identified the theme of 2019 as “Promoting Sustainable and Inclusive Development of the Partnership” and set up three working groups to focus on regional sustainable energy development cooperation, regional connectivity and sustainable development, and cooperation in environmental protection.

On April 16, NACT China and NACT Vietnam held a working group meeting with the theme of Sustainable Energy Development in Hanoi. The two sides hoped to meet the demands of regional and national sustainable economic development through energy cooperation. The meeting introduced the current energy development policy of each country and the opportunities and challenges in its implementation. It also introduced the current energy cooperation mechanism and specific actions between China and ASEAN members, as well as proposing new directions for cooperation on regional sustainable energy development. Reliable and affordable energy is critical to economic development because of its importance for adapting to rapid urbanization, modernization, and industrialization. Regional energy cooperation between ASEAN members first began to grow 20 years ago in 1997 when ASEAN leaders proposed the ASEAN Energy Transportation Line Initiative. The initiative has long been advocated by all parties, yet progress has so far been lagging. Taking advantage of the Belt and Road Initiative, China has promoted an energy cooperation framework to expand global cooperation in traditional, non-traditional, and renewable energy. It has already established 56 bilateral energy cooperation mechanisms, 19 multilateral energy cooperation mechanisms, and signed 100 energy cooperation agreements. Since 2003, the country has also invested over \$66 billion U.S. dollars in the Southeast Asian energy sector, which accounts for 48% of total Chinese investment in the region. But energy cooperation between the two sides also faces challenges, such as limited fiscal support for renewable energy, inadequate infrastructure, a low innovation rate for energy efficiency, and a lack of institutional, policy, and legal regulations to facilitate investment and encourage participation of the private sector. Through engagement and frank discussion, the meeting put forward recommendations to address such challenges. This included transferring technology to increase the efficiency of energy supply and demand, harmonizing the regional fiscal and legal framework to facilitate energy

trade and investments in sustainable energy, and improving the tariff system and market environment for energy development.

On April 30, the Working Group Meeting on Regional Connectivity and Sustainability was held in Malaysia. The meeting discussed progress in regional infrastructure construction, the Belt and Road Initiative, the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025, appropriate mechanisms to assess the sustainability of connectivity, and the role of different stakeholders. The meeting also gave constructive policy recommendations in the areas of politics, institutional development, good governance, and due diligence.

On May 17, the Working Group Meeting on Environmental Protection in ASEAN and China was held in Singapore. Participants conducted an in-depth discussion on environmental issues, such as air pollution and land and water disputes. They also summarized challenges and the experiences they had in formulating and implementing environmental policies, as well as discussing a coordinated approach to promoting China-ASEAN environmental protection. The working group report argued that regional countries should prioritize environmental protection when pursuing growth and, in recognition of the development gaps between countries, allow for the sharing of information, expertise, technology, and resources between better and less endowed societies.

6. Digital Economy and Poverty Alleviation

In 2020, the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 had a negative impact on international academic exchange. NACT successively held three working group meetings via video call.

On July 9, the Video Working Group Meeting on “ASEAN-China Cooperation on Poverty Alleviation against the Backdrop of the COVID-19 Pandemic” took place. The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 posed great challenges to the economic and social development of regional countries. Both China and ASEAN faced, and arguably still do, challenges regarding the impact of slower economic growth on poorer populations and the growth of inequality. Experts conducted in-depth discussions on “COVID-19 and Poverty Alleviation”; “E-commerce and Best Cases of Poverty Alleviation”; and “Sustainable Agriculture Development and Poverty Alleviation”. Despite good cooperation during the pandemic, China and ASEAN countries should further strengthen their policy coordination to better tackle poverty. Countries in the region should adopt a “people-centered” approach in their epidemic response and development philosophy, as well as

increase investment in economic infrastructure and human capital. Countries should also promote the participation of diversified actors, such as communities, companies, and international development partners. They should also take advantage of “2020 China-ASEAN Year of Digital Economy Cooperation” to provide more entrepreneurial and employment opportunities for poorer segments of society.

On September 30, the NACT Video Working Group Meeting on the “Future of Labor in ASEAN and China: Challenges and Responses” took place. The fourth industrial revolution poses new challenges for many economies, including but not limited to how to deal with the substitution effect of artificial intelligence on the labor force. Experts agreed that China and ASEAN countries should make overall strategic plans which improve regional digital infrastructure and cultivate improved digital economy skills among the workforces. On the one hand, they should transform and upgrade agriculture, manufacturing and the service industry with disruptive technologies like big data and artificial intelligence. On the other hand, they should also improve human capital and develop effective social security systems in their own countries to achieve a people-centered labor development strategy which is both resilient and inclusive.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, digital platforms have proven very useful in pandemic control and facilitating the post-COVID economic recovery. However, a large digital divide between countries, urban and rural areas, and different social groups still needs to be bridged.

Against this backdrop, on October 12, the NACT Video Working Group Meeting “Advancing Regional Cooperation on Managing Digital Platforms: Implications and Ways forward for ASEAN and China in the New Normal” took place. This meeting aimed to facilitate communication and cooperation between countries in the management of digital platforms and offer suggestions for promoting the development of a digital economy in China and ASEAN countries. The meeting concluded that China and ASEAN countries should make the growth of a dynamic digital economy and management of new digital platforms key priorities for both parties moving forward. On the one hand, the two sides should recognize the potential synergies between the building of both the Digital Belt and Road Initiative and Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025, and further strengthening the construction of information and communication infrastructure in the region. On the other hand, the two sides should also advance digital education, ameliorate laws and regulations relevant to the development of e-commerce, and explore the establishment of appropriate redistribution policies

and mechanisms to provide strong institutional guarantees for digital economy pioneers.

The three working group meetings held by NACT in 2020 were all fruitful in that they offered valuable intellectual support and produced many workable policy recommendations. Over the course of seven years, NACT has established joint research groups to conduct detailed studies and hold discussions on key, difficult issues in the development of China-ASEAN relations.

On November 12, 2020, the 23rd China-ASEAN Leaders' Meeting was held via video call. The Chairman's statement issued after the meeting rated NACT's work very highly and called upon it to also facilitate people-to-people exchange across the region.

7. ASEAN-China Cooperation in the Post-pandemic Era

In 2021, NACT conducted four working group video meetings and initiated joint research on four topics, namely global and regional supply chains, vaccine and green lane cooperation, public health cooperation and environmental protection cooperation. Over the past 30 years, global and regional supply chains have played a significant role in connecting developing countries to the global market. With the recent advent of protectionism and anti-globalization, the outbreak of COVID-19, the emergence of new technologies and the climate crisis, current global and regional supply chains have been negatively impacted. An emerging trend for China includes the "inverse flow" of business investment as global and regional supply chains are restructured and companies become more willing to adopt near-shore outsourcing and the "China Plus 1" Tactic.

On June 30, NACT held a video working group meeting on "Shifting Global and Regional Supply Chains: Implications for Sustainable Development of ASEAN and China", aiming to promote communication and cooperation among China and ASEAN countries in the process of restructuring and maintaining the stability of global and regional supply chains. The experts agreed that China and ASEAN countries should seize development opportunities, manage challenges, and work together to promote regional economic recovery. On the one hand, China and ASEAN countries should safeguard the stability of supply chains by strengthening COVID-19 cooperation, including vaccine development, production, distribution, and inoculation monitoring. On the other hand, China and ASEAN countries should enhance their competitiveness by improving

cooperation in soft and hard infrastructure building under the Belt and Road Initiative and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

On July 9, the “Public-Private Partnership in 30-Years ASEAN-China Public Health Cooperation” working group meeting took place online. The participants focused on the public health crisis and agreed that the negative impact of COVID-19 witnessed thus far was symptomatic of the government’s incapacity to provide relevant resources. It was recognized that the path to recovery is filled with uncertainty and that it is important to strike a balance between health security and economic development.

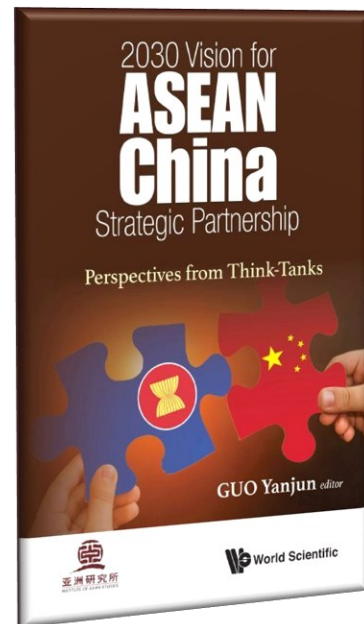
On July 16, the “ASEAN-China Cooperation on Nature-Based Solutions to Environmental Issues” online working group meeting was successfully held. The participants shared their experience on the mitigation of climate change via nature-based strategies, including environmental restoration techniques and the building of ecologically friendly cities, as well as discussing the applicability of nature-based solutions in the wider region.

On July 28, the “Reconnecting ASEAN and China: Vaccine Multilateralism and Safer Green Lanes” online working group meeting was convened. The participants discussed how countries in the region should use vaccine multilateral cooperation to build regional immune resilience and sign Travel Bubble Protocols to promote greater connectivity and restart economic growth.

8. Outreach Activities

Since its establishment seven years ago, NACT has served as an essential platform for Chinese and ASEAN think tanks to conduct joint research and engage in scholarly exchange. NACT has played a track-two role in regional cooperation, meaning it encourages dialogue outside of official government channels as a non-state actor. With the effort of Chinese and ASEAN think tanks,

experts, scholars, and representatives from different sectors, we have witnessed in-depth and active discussion, and gathered valuable new insights. At the 2018 NACT Country Coordinators Meeting, NACT decided to compile joint research of the working group to expand its influence, build an academic brand and reach a wider audience. The compilations were published by the Singapore-based World Scientific Publishing Company, one of the most influential English publishers in East Asia. So far, NACT has published three collections of working group research papers, namely: 2030 Vision for ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership: Perspectives from Think-Tanks; ASEAN-China Cooperation for Environmental Protection and Sustainable Energy Development; and ASEAN-China Cooperation on Regional Connectivity and Sustainability.



Ways Forward

2021 marks the 30th anniversary of the establishment of China-ASEAN Dialogue Relations and a milestone in the development of bilateral relations. Standing on the verge of a new point in history, NACT will continue to play its role of Track-Two Diplomacy, strive to reach further consensus among China and ASEAN countries, and deepen the bilateral strategic partnership. Looking to the future, it will continue to strengthen institution building capacities, widen its influence among the general public and conduct forward-looking studies.

In terms of institution building, NACT has preliminarily built the working mechanism at three levels (the national coordinator meeting, working group meeting, and annual conference). The Joint research group and working group meeting are also important approaches for NACT to conduct its research and gather ideas from experts and scholars in different countries. This is of great value for the deepening of relations among China and ASEAN countries. Therefore, it is essential to consolidate ties between NACT and government officials of different countries, as well as the China-ASEAN Summit. NACT's research should be conducted on the basis of better understanding the key issues in the two party's bilateral relations. It should also have a formal channel to

submit research results, allowing for the transformation of new insights into policy in a more timely manner.

Social influence is key to the survival of think tanks to build an improved reputation and better promote its knowledge products. Thus, think tanks must effectively communicate opinions, articles, and views on the core agendas of China-ASEAN relations to a wider audience, as well as take questions from the public. In the age of the internet, NACT is able to innovate its method of spreading policy recommendations by tapping into social media and new communication tools such as WeChat, Sina Weibo, Facebook and Twitter. We hope to influence society by using the internet to disseminate new thoughts, views, ideas, knowledge, and innovations to the general public and government officials. We also seek to stay committed to inclusiveness and opening up. The Country Coordinating institutions of NACT should be encouraged to gather more influential regional scholars to contribute intellectual support to the development of China and ASEAN relations. NACT also needs to strengthen its collaboration with think tanks both inside and outside the region to learn from a wider range of policy experts. As a bridge between the government and the people, NACT not only aids the public to better understand government policies, but also assists the government in understanding the people's will, in turn helping to lay a solid social foundation for peace and cooperation.

So, how can NACT lead in terms of its research and ideas? Here is what we plan to do moving forward:

1. Take the initiative in forming leading opinions and blaze a new trail for China-ASEAN relations. NACT needs to prepare a reservoir of research reports and work on issues that may not currently be relevant but will likely become more important in the future.

2. Be forward-looking. Make a three-to-five-year plan on bilateral relations, foresee problems and possible progress during policy implementation and provide suggestions or recommendations. NACT should aim to predict possible outcomes of certain policies and propose targeted responses.

3. Interpret policies. Carry out studies on policy outcomes and make relevant evaluations. Conduct a feasibility study and at the same time a non-feasibility study.

4. Be innovative. It is important to have ground-breaking research findings, new theoretical breakthroughs and novel insights.

APPENDIX I

NACT Country Coordinating Institute

BDIPSS	BRUNEI <i>Brunei Darussalam Institute of Policy and Strategic Studies (BDIPSS)</i>
	CAMBODIA <i>Cambodia Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP)</i>
	CHINA <i>Institute of Asian Studies of China Foreign Affairs University (IAS, CFAU)</i>
	INDONESIA <i>ASEAN Studies Centre of the University of GadjahMada (ASC-UGM)</i>
	LAO PDR <i>Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA) of the Lao PDR</i>
	MALAYSIA <i>Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS)</i>
	MYANMAR <i>Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS)</i>
	THE PHILIPPINES <i>Foreign Service Institute (FSI)</i>
	SINGAPORE <i>East Asian Institute of the National University of Singapore (EAI, NUS)</i>
	THAILAND <i>Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation</i>
	VIETNAM <i>Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV)</i>

APPENDIX II

NACT Meetings List

<i>Date</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>July 3rd, 2014</i>	1st NACT Country Coordinators Meeting
<i>July 4th, 2014</i>	Seminar on Building a China-ASEAN Community with a Shared Future and the Launch Conference of NACT
<i>November 16th-17th, 2015</i>	2nd NACT Country Coordinators Meeting and the Seminar on China-ASEAN Relations
<i>May 18th-19th, 2016</i>	1 st Working Group Meeting of NACT on China and ASEAN: Deepening the Strategic Cooperative Partnership-Commemorating the 25th Anniversary of China-ASEAN Dialogue Partnership
<i>July 24th, 2016</i>	Working Group Meeting of NACT on China and ASEAN: Deepening the Strategic Cooperative Partnership-Commemorating the 25th Anniversary of China-ASEAN Dialogue Partnership
<i>August 14th-16th, 2016</i>	3 rd Country Coordinators Meeting of NACT and the Seminar on China and ASEAN: Establishing Progressive and Prosperous Partnership
<i>May 16, 2017</i>	NACT Working Group Meeting on Promoting People-to-People Exchanges between ASEAN and China through Cooperation in Culture
<i>June 6, 2017</i>	NACT Working Group Meeting on Promoting People-to-People Exchanges between ASEAN and China through Tourism Cooperation
<i>June 9, 2017</i>	NACT Working Group Meeting on Education Cooperation
<i>October 4-5, 2017</i>	4th NACT Country Coordinators Meeting and the Conference on People-to-People Exchanges: New Pillar of China-ASEAN Relations
<i>January 26, 2018</i>	NACT Special Working Group Meeting on 2030 Vision for ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership
<i>July 6, 2018</i>	NACT Working Group Meeting on E-Commerce
<i>December 20-21, 2018</i>	5th NACT Country Coordinators Meeting and the 5th Annual Conference on Promoting Smart Cities Development and Innovative Solutions between ASEAN and China
<i>April 16, 2019</i>	NACT Working Group Meeting on Regional Cooperation for Sustainable Energy Development
<i>April 30, 2019</i>	NACT Working Group Meeting on Regional Connectivity and Sustainability
<i>May 17, 2019</i>	NACT Working Group Meeting on Environment Protection in ASEAN and China

<i>June 13-14, 2019</i>	6th NACT Country Coordinators Meeting and the 6th Annual Conference on Enhancing Inclusive and Sustainable Economic Development
<i>July 9, 2020</i>	NACT Working Group Video Meeting on ASEAN-China Cooperation on Poverty Alleviation against the Backdrop of the COVID-19 Pandemic
<i>September 30, 2020</i>	NACT Working Group Online Meeting on Future of Labor in ASEAN and China: Challenges and Responses
<i>October 12, 2020</i>	NACT Working Group Video Meeting on Advancing Regional Cooperation on Managing Digital Platforms: Implications and Ways Forward for ASEAN and China in the New Normal
<i>March 19, 2021</i>	7th NACT Country Coordinators Meeting and the Conference on the 30th Anniversary of ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations
<i>June 30, 2021</i>	NACT Working Group Online Meeting on Shifting Global and Regional Supply Chains: Implications for Sustainable Development of ASEAN and China
<i>July 9, 2021</i>	NACT Working Group Online Meeting on Public-Private Partnership in 30-Years ASEAN-China Public Health Cooperation
<i>July 16, 2021</i>	NACT Working Group Meeting on ASEAN-China Cooperation on Nature-based Solutions to Environmental Issues
<i>July 28, 2021</i>	NACT Working Group Online Meeting on Reconnecting ASEAN and China: Vaccine Multilateralism, and Safer Green Lanes and Travel Bubble Protocols to Reignite Economic Growth and Tourism

A STORY OF THE ‘YOUNG SEAKERS’: NURTURING ASEAN YOUTH DIPLOMACY AND PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE CONNECTIVITY

Lim Chhay* and Likhedy Touch†

** **Lim Chhay** is the co-founder and chapter leader of the Young SEAkErs Cambodia. He holds a B.A. in International Studies with Honor from Royal University of Phnom Penh.*

*† **Likhedy Touch** is the co-founder and chapter leader of the Young SEAkErs Cambodia. She holds a B.A. in International Studies from Royal University of Phnom Penh and Bachelor of Law from Royal University of Law and Economics.*

*A group of young people come from different countries in Southeast Asia holding their respective nationalities yet share the same identity: "ASEAN citizens". A strong sense of ASEAN identity has brought them together to work for the ASEAN Community, putting effort into raising ASEAN awareness, discussing ASEAN specific problems, and suggesting practical solutions. They are known as "**the Young SEAk**ers" (TYS), a group of passionate ASEAN youths aspiring to be a key driving force for ASEAN youth diplomacy and people-to-people connectivity.*

The Young SEAkers Stories

"ASEAN-China Voyagers of Today, Regional Leaders of Tomorrow" is the official slogan for the Young SEAk

ers. We are confident that Southeast Asian youths will be the next generation of leaders navigating their future careers in the region. Together, they believe that they can make the ASEAN dream realisable. The first step to achieve that goal is bridging the gap between the demand and supply of local talents. Through the Young SEAk

ers, individuals have provided ASEAN youths with immense opportunities and a platform to engage in a stronger and mutually beneficial network. Headquartered in Singapore, the group has eight national chapters across ASEAN countries, and is soon to complete the ASEAN ten.

Mission and Visions of the Young SEAkers

We believe that "the future belongs to Asia" and are building this cross-national collaboration under the name of the Young SEAk

ers with the vision to move and create a new generation of ASEAN-China savvy youth leaders. "SEAk

ers" is a self-explanatory term, defined as youths who actively seek ASEAN-China opportunities in Southeast Asia and are well-equipped with cross-border competencies and the relevant soft skills to navigate the region.

With our vision, we thrive to unlock the potential of ASEAN youths and equip them with essential cross-border competencies, including soft skills and experiences, by offering them complementary programs designed specifically based on the trends and demands of our current context. Furthermore, with the mindset of upholding the value of collaborative partnership, we often carry out our programs via cooperation with relevant stakeholders, including but not limited to fellow national chapters, local organizations and think tanks, and academic institutions, among others.

About the Young SEAkErs Cambodia (TYS Cambodia)

Not long after the Young SEAkErs group was established in Singapore, in September 2020, we co-founded the Young SEAkErs Cambodia Chapter, one of the Southeast Asia-based non-profit organizations committed to building a regional community by bringing vibrant and competent youths together who are passionate about advancing the prospects of the ASEAN-China region. We are strongly supported by the Young SEAkErs Advisory Network as well as our National Chapter Advisors from all different walks of life, who themselves share a common commitment with us in shaping the regional leaders of tomorrow. Currently, the Young SEAkErs Cambodia is proud to have two national advisors, Dr. Neak Chandarith and Mr. Touch Darren, who are eminent scholars with many years of experience in public policy, education, and political science.



What's in it for the SEAkErs?

The Young SEAkErs have three flagship programmes that are implemented across all national chapters: SEAkE Go!, SEAkErs Meal and Mingle (M&M), and SEAkErs in Dialogue. All of these programmes have their own objectives and contribute towards skills development and networking for Southeast Asian youths.

SEAkErs Go!

Visiting other countries allow you to appreciate new cultures. Do you agree with this? Because we do! SEAkErs Go! is designed to bring you on an immersive and engaging journey to explore ASEAN countries and China, where each learning

journey includes cultural and corporate visits as well as local university tours and dialogue sessions with local university students. Through this, we strive to equip the SEAkors with ASEAN and China experiences and the necessary skill sets to become effective change-makers of the future. Once a year, SEAkors Go! will travel to one ASEAN country based on the Chairmanship of ASEAN, as well as to one city in China.

SEAkors Meal and Mingle (M&M)

Every country's cuisine is worth exploring, especially Asian cuisine! And of course, discovering any national cuisine means you're also learning more about their culture and traditions. The best of SEAkors M&M is that not only are you able to explore authentic Southeast Asian dishes, but at the same time you are able to meet with like-minded Southeast Asian youths and exchange diverse points of view on different subjects. Hence, you will get the opportunity to make friends from different nationalities and local communities.

SEAkors in Dialogue

It is our mission to engage distinguished Southeast Asian experts and leaders from all walks of life including but not limited to international affairs, entrepreneurship and business, and the digital economy to share their insights and experiences with the SEAkors. We thrive to create a safe space for youths to freely connect, discuss and share on topics close to their hearts as well as to deepen their perspectives and understanding on Southeast Asian issues. The group has covered several topics such as the role of youth diplomacy in ASEAN Building Community, roles and responsibilities of youth for future-ready ASEAN, and mental health in the time of COVID-19.

Besides these flagship programmes being implemented across all national chapters, each chapter also has their own additional programs based on their national context and demand. As 2021 is an important year for Cambodia to prepare for the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022, the Young SEAkors Cambodia strives to support the Chairmanship by initiating youth-experts dialogues, formal and informal discussions, and blog-writing campaigns in the areas of ASEAN Community pillars.



SEAKers in Dialogue: ASEAN Talk on The Role of Youth Diplomacy in ASEAN Community Building. Photo Credit: The Young SEAKers Cambodia.

Promoting Youth Diplomacy for Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship 2022

Diplomacy is an important political activity to bridge relationships between states. Diplomacy is a peaceful means for states to achieve their foreign policy objectives without the use of force or propaganda. However, young people are often neglected from the process of policy-making and public diplomacy. While the region has been facing a greater number of newly-emerging challenges, especially during the current global pandemic, people should come to the realization that youth diplomacy has a valuable role to play in shaping the vision of ASEAN Community.

"Youth Diplomacy" is emerging as a new and unofficial form of cross-border youth-connectivity to support state-to-state diplomatic relations, as well as regional collaboration, shifting away from conventional diplomacy focusing solely on official state actors. In the ASEAN context, the concept of youth diplomacy has been promoted since the establishment of the ASEAN Foundation in 1994, with the firm objective to raise ASEAN awareness and create additional capacity-building programmes for young people in Southeast Asia.¹

¹ "History and Mission." ASEAN Foundation. Accessed August 29, 2021. https://www.aseanfoundation.org/history_and_mission

SEAkers ASEAN Talk

The Role of Youth Diplomacy in ASEAN Community Building

Moderated by



Lim Chhay
Co-Founder TYS
Cambodia Chapter



Debbie Chew
Secretary-General,
China ASEAN Youth Summit



Khin Phyu Cyn Kyi
Co-Founder Myanmar
National Youth Diplomacy Program



Vong Saravuth
Cambodian Representative
Young ASEAN Leaders Policy Initiative

The world is experiencing an unprecedented global pandemic with restrictions being placed on freedom of movement and social-gatherings across the ASEAN region to prevent COVID-19 transmission. The response to this development among modern civil society has proven that digitalization has become a vital part of human life and we are moving inexorably towards greater innovation and technological advancement in the 21st century. Youths are considered as the main agents of this particular change.

To fulfill this crucial need, the role of young people is more important than ever. Throughout the pandemic period, the Young SEAkers has hosted more than 30 webinars across the region, covering Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Cambodia, engaging experts and young people on ASEAN affairs discussion. The Young SEAkers Cambodia has been in close cooperation with local think-tanks and universities and has hosted ASEAN talk series on the role of youth diplomacy in Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship. This important and timely

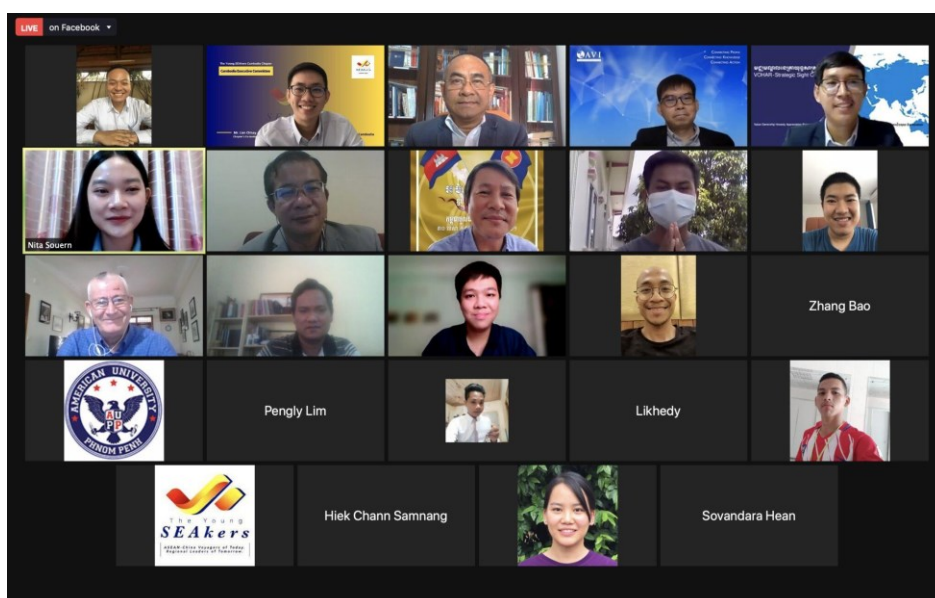
discussion has highlighted the fact that an inclusive and future-ready ASEAN Community depends largely on active engagement from youths which account for 213 million people out of ASEAN's total population of 620 million. A resilient and innovative community requires more effort than just inter-state level collaboration, but also connectivity at the socio-cultural level, putting a strong emphasis on youths. The Young SEAkErs webinars gather youth across the region to understand in-depth perspectives on the opportunities and challenges facing ASEAN, and more significantly, how they can be involved in this process to take advantage of their full potential, as well as to cope with uncertain and unprecedented challenges.

In the context of Cambodia, youth diplomacy will add value to both the national and regional level of youth development policy. In 2011, the Royal Government of Cambodia adopted the National Policy on Youth Development², committed to pushing forward youth representation at the national, sub-national, and regional levels. The implementation of youth development policy aims to equip Cambodian youths with physical strength, consciousness, ethics, values, skills, and intellect. Apart from the Young SEAkErs and its partnership, there are many youth initiatives working on ASEAN-related matters, such as the Cambodia National Model ASEAN Meeting, the Khmer Model ASEAN Meeting, and the ASEAN Youth Network Advocate, among others. This shows that Cambodian youth have the capability to spearhead successful ASEAN awareness programmes and to build a wider network across Southeast Asia. More and more initiatives have played an active role in raising issues pertinent to ASEAN, not only at the government level, but also at a grassroots level involving young people, civil society organizations, and non-profit organizations. These initiatives also help to raise ASEAN awareness, promote ASEAN cultural diplomacy, and bridge the ASEAN socio-cultural divide. The overall objective of these initiatives will also support the socio-cultural community side events of Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022.

Additionally, the ASEAN Foundation has been a main actor supporting the annual side events in ASEAN countries. The ASEAN Foundation Model ASEAN Meeting known as AFMAM, and other ASEAN Foundation flagship programmes are held annually in the ASEAN's rotating chairman country. We strongly believe that the Young SEAkErs together with other national youth initiatives in Cambodia will serve as an outstanding focal point for ASEAN's supporting initiatives next year. This is a platform of youth diplomacy, a

² "National Policy on Youth Development". Royal Government of Cambodia. Accessed July 13 2021. https://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Cambodia_2011_Policy_Youth_Development.pdf

platform of promoting people-to-people connectivity in ASEAN, and a platform to build a strong network for ASEAN's future leaders.



*The Young SEAKers Cambodia collaborated with local think-tank and university host Youth an Expert-Dialogue on Cambodia's Membership in ASEAN.
Photo Credit: The Young SEAKers Cambodia Chapter.*

Bridging ASEAN Socio-Cultural Connectivity

How will ASEAN promote and prioritize unofficial diplomacy moving forward? An example of ASEAN Track II diplomacy is seen in the work of the think tank network to promote an East Asian Community, known as the Network of East Asia Think Tank (NEAT). There are other emerging think tank and university expert networks across ASEAN and ASEAN's external partners, such as the Network of ASEAN-China Think Tank (NACT), and the ASEAN University Network (AUN), just to mention a few. Young people are also absent from this track's working process. It is time for the region to reconsider where young people can and should play a role in shaping ASEAN's socio-cultural goals. Earlier this year, the EU Commission funded a new initiative called EANGAGE – the EU-ASEAN Next Generation Think Tank Network to work on research projects in the areas of sustainability, security and connectivity. Up to 130 young people from EU and ASEAN regions are working closely to produce policy inputs for the EU-ASEAN strategic partnership. Youth diplomacy is starting to become more widely recognized, and therefore, the establishment of the Young SEAKers initiative at this time will be another step towards a closer collaboration

of youth diplomacy in the post-pandemic period. That is to provide more youth diplomatic opportunities to meet and exchange their diverse cultures and identities, and at the same time, develop their necessary professional skills to meet the needs of an uncertain future across ASEAN.

Having seen that there are more emerging national and regional initiatives led by Cambodian youths, we believe that they play an important role in bridging the ASEAN Socio-Cultural divide. The important point is that they are a showcase of Cambodia's prestige as an international state as well as Cambodia's commitment to promoting mutual understanding and collaboration among the population and contributing to the realization of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. Last but not least, their significant projects on ASEAN reflect the notion that the ASEAN Community vision goes well beyond regional political and economic integration, but also includes "people-to-people diplomacy" to achieve a people-oriented and people-centered ASEAN Community.

The Way Forward

What's next for us? The Young SEAkErs Cambodia will continue to uphold our vision and carry out programmes to support the ASEAN Community, including providing more opportunities for ASEAN youths to strengthen their knowledge and to develop their skills. Southeast Asian youths will be a key agent of regional change, and to achieve this goal we have many upcoming events and initiatives aligned with our long-term vision. We seek to expand our regional community beyond national boundaries, and elevate this platform as a central youth hub for the ASEAN Community to connect and collaborate. These collaborations and partnerships shall not be limited to just dialogue on ASEAN regional affairs but will also include regional exposure through internships, professional careers, and other social-cultural exchange programmes for Southeast Asian youths. We strive to be an integral regional actor when it comes to youth diplomacy, ready to support and contribute towards the ASEAN mission. The SEAkErs are ready to take the lead and navigate opportunities for youth in the region.

EPILOGUE

The preceding chapters were written by a group of astute ASEAN observers from Cambodia and elsewhere around the region. An overriding theme of the book is ASEAN's concern over strained U.S.-China relations and their potential adverse impact on the region. While ASEAN may be an institution that speaks with multiple voices, all 10 member countries agree that the region does not wish to choose sides. Yet, while Southeast Asian nations want the United States to deepen its engagement and leadership in the region through ASEAN, there seems to be no coherent, shared consensus on what U.S. engagement and leadership in Southeast Asia, and the Indo-Pacific more broadly, should look like.

While many outside the region are critical of ASEAN, calling it not much more than a "talk shop," the regional grouping has accomplished much in its 54-year history, and the United States, China, and the rest of the world should recognize ASEAN for its own importance, apart from great-power rivalries. In the aftermath of the Cold War, it expanded its membership from five to 10 countries as each of them continued to transform themselves from battlefields to marketplaces. Its collective GDP between 1999 and 2019 rose from \$700 billion to \$3.2 trillion, the fastest growth of any region in the world. Collectively, ASEAN has the world's third-largest workforce and fifth-largest economy. The United States is ASEAN's fourth-largest export market, and in 2019 ASEAN became China's largest trading partner, surpassing both the United States and the European Union.

While the U.S. remains an important trade and investment partner for ASEAN, China has been the region's economic engine for more than a decade and will continue to be so in the foreseeable future. Southeast Asia is integral to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), its most ambitious geopolitical initiative to date, which is affecting virtually every element of Southeast Asian societies—from shipping to agriculture, digital economy to tourism, and politics to culture.

Southeast Asia's sea lanes are located at the center of the area possessing the world's strongest economic growth, a critical hub for global trade. More than one-third of global trade and 66 percent of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas passes through the Straits of Malacca into the South China Sea and elsewhere. This is three times more than the Suez Canal and 15 times more than the Panama

Canal. Southeast Asian waters serve as the energy lifeline for China, Japan, and South Korea, as 80 percent or more of their energy is shipped through this area from the Middle East.

Despite the region's importance, however, Southeast Asia and ASEAN are beset by challenges, most notably the COVID-19 pandemic, rising tensions in the South China Sea, and political turbulence in Myanmar. Underlying these issues is the U.S.-China rivalry in the region, which is calling into question ASEAN centrality and the regional grouping's ability to adapt to new circumstances. The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated an already tense U.S.-China relationship, making it hard for the two powers to cooperate in combating the global pandemic. The pandemic has battered Southeast Asian economies, ruined lives, and sharpened wealth disparities between nations and within societies, threatening to leave millions of Southeast Asians behind economically.

Negotiations with China on a Code of Conduct (COC) for the South China Sea have dragged on unproductively for almost two decades, and the prospect that an agreement will come to fruition in 2022 is small. China's construction and militarization of artificial islands in the Spratly chain has radically upended the status quo in the South China Sea and maritime security more broadly. Since 2017, Beijing has steadily deployed naval coast guard vessels and fishing fleets, which act as militias on the new islands, in unprecedented numbers. Southeast Asian fishing fleets are now being outcompeted by China's fleets off their own shores. If this trend continues, fish stocks, already pushed to the limit, will collapse. Southeast Asian states will also be forced to abandon offshore energy exploration, as no commercial actor will accept the risks of operating in the South China Sea. The September 2021 AUKUS agreement between the United States, Australia, and Great Britain represents a hardening of American attitudes and threatens an arms race. Again, ASEAN is not speaking in unison. Malaysia and Indonesia have expressed concerns that AUKUS will further inflame the U.S.-China rivalry; Singapore and the Philippines are supportive; the other six members have remained guarded in their reactions. Consequently, ASEAN has not released a statement about the formation of AUKUS, and cracks in the institution appear to be widening under these external pressures.

The February 2021 coup in Myanmar may be ASEAN's biggest security challenge since it became a 10-member grouping in 1999. Since the coup, more than 1,200 people have been murdered by the Myanmar military and police and more than 8,000 have been arrested. ASEAN has been trying to end the violence in Myanmar and to open a dialogue between military rulers and their opponents, but is it able to mediate? There seems to be no room for moderates anywhere in

Myanmar—in the military, in the National League for Democracy, in Generation Z, and perhaps in all of society. How can these parties reach compromise when antagonisms run so deep? In this instance, ASEAN appears to have no centrality, and therefore little relevance, despite Indonesia’s best efforts.

While COVID-19, the South China Sea, and political instability in Myanmar threaten ASEAN centrality, there are still areas that merit ASEAN’s concerted efforts. To strengthen its centrality, ASEAN nations should work among themselves to resolve territorial disputes on both land and sea. Showing the region and the broader international community that it can resolve these issues through negotiation would demonstrate that ASEAN can shape relations among its members and with external great powers. Otherwise, these external powers may reshape relations within ASEAN.

One issue the preceding chapters could have focused on is climate change. Southeast Asia is the most disaster-prone region in the world. Heat waves, floods, droughts, typhoons, and tsunamis affect every aspect of life—from nutrition, to health and safety, to income. Two-thirds of Southeast Asians live in low-lying coastal areas. A two-meter rise in the ocean could displace tens of millions of people throughout the region, with serious implications for Southeast Asia’s water, food, and energy security. Rising seas are a key challenge for Southeast Asia that will require both regional and global solutions. Southeast Asia should work cooperatively through ASEAN to address the challenges of climate change—reducing greenhouse gases in the atmosphere through CO2 sequestration and reforestation, investing in clean energy, protecting fragile forests, and mitigating plastic and microplastic pollution in oceans, rivers, and streams.

Southeast Asia’s population of 662 million is among the world’s youngest. Fifty-eight percent are under the age of 35. The proportion is even higher in countries like Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar. Digital connectivity has blurred physical borders, and countries can no longer remain isolated—even Myanmar, which is failing to quell domestic unrest and deep, national discontent. Along with political and economic aspects of regional cooperation, such as free trade areas and international supply chains, the social aspect of people-to-people connectivity is vital. The youth of today will be the leaders and citizens of tomorrow. Fostering youth cooperation, both within the region and with foreign partners like the United States, China, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and others, will yield net gains for Southeast Asia and for all involved.

In 2022, Cambodia will assume the rotating ASEAN chair. The last time Cambodia was chair, in 2012, members were unable to agree on how to deal with China's claims in the South China Sea, and for the first and only time in the group's 54-year history they failed to issue a statement. Cambodia is about to be the chair again, at a time when ASEAN must contend with a pandemic, weak economies, political turbulence in Myanmar, and the continuing, long-standing disputes in the South China Sea. Cambodia appears to be more dependent on China than it was 10 years ago, but as the longest-serving national leader in ASEAN, could Prime Minister Hun Sen play the role of senior statesman and transform contention between extra-regional powers into cooperation?

The emergence of the Quad, a loose coalition of the United States, Australia, India, and Japan, and the creation of AUKUS, the Indo-Pacific security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, come at a time when ASEAN centrality is eroding. While some ASEAN members have expressed no objection, others have voiced their reservations and concerns, and others remain silent. ASEAN is not a security organization, whereas AUKUS and the Quad focus specifically on security issues, particularly in the maritime domain. But the Quad and AUKUS are not economic organizations either, and economic integration has been ASEAN's strength over the course of its 54-year history.

Twenty years ago, ASEAN was at a high point. It had brought Cambodia in as its last member in 1999 and was viewed as the preeminent regional institution, integral to broader Asian regional architecture – the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, ASEAN+3 (China, Japan, and South Korea), and other forums. Since that time, ASEAN's collective GDP has more than quadrupled as economic interdependence with China has grown denser. For this, Southeast Asia, through ASEAN, needs to be recognized for its own importance. Policies should not be predicated on efforts to neutralize China or efforts by any country, including China, to divide the region. China is close and its influence is significant and important. It is the region's economic engine. But the United States also has an important role to play, and ASEAN, by and large, wants the U.S. to continue to play its role as a security guarantor so that no single power becomes a regional hegemon. Without a significant economic component, however, "over-securitizing" does not benefit U.S. interests in the region, and an economic strategy must be an integral part of America's strategic calculus in Southeast Asia.

AUKUS and the Quad will not displace ASEAN, but their creation may prove to be a pivotal reconfiguration of the broader Asian regional architecture. Time will

tell. ASEAN will continue to bandwagon, hedge, and co-engage with extra-regional powers. But failure to constructively address COVID-19, the economic recovery from the pandemic, and the crisis in Myanmar will only weaken ASEAN's effectiveness and therefore its centrality. The Indo-Pacific remains a work in progress, with countries offering various ideas and approaches. ASEAN should continue its co-engagement policy with China, the United States, and other nations, but it needs to develop a more coherent Indo-Pacific strategy, or other nations may find opportunities to shape the broader Asian regional architecture in line with their own purposes.

John J. Brandon is The Asia Foundation's Senior Director of International Relations Programs in Washington, D.C. The views expressed here are his own.

THE ASIA FOUNDATION OFFICE IN CAMBODIA

House No. 59, Oknha Peich (St. 242)

Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Tel: +855 (23) 210-431

Email: cambodia.general@asiafoundation.org

<http://asiafoundation.org/where-we-work/cambodia/>

CAMBODIAN INSTITUTE FOR COOPERATION AND PEACE

No. 204, Street 1966, Phum Paung Peay, Sangkat Phnom Penh Thmey

Khan Sen Sok, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Email: cicp01@online.com.kh

Webpage: www.cicp.org.kh