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Weak states' regionalism: ASEAN and the limits of security cooperation in Pacific Asia

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Abstract

Since the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) expanded its institutional outreach to span the broader Asia Pacific and new policy areas, a dominant orthodoxy has placed the organization at the center of the region's international order. More recently, uncertainty in the context of China's rise sheds doubt on ASEAN's apparent centrality to its procedurally driven transformation of foreign relations across East Asia. While theories of cooperation explain why and when minor powers choose to pool their resources, the reverse logic has hardly been considered. This paper shows that the particular type of ASEAN regionalism is not only a product of weak states' cooperation but that the lack of capacity also sets the limits for the regional project. Two case studies on intramural security elicit the limited effectiveness of ASEAN's endeavor to develop into a

security community. Meanwhile, as an examination of the South China Sea dispute demonstrates, its attempt to export its norms has rendered it vulnerable to the intervention of more powerful actors and increasingly side-lined by the evolution of great power rivalry.

1 Introduction

In August 2015, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) celebrates its forty-eighth anniversary as a regional security arrangement. The association, over the best part of half a century, emerged incrementally on the regional stage. This gradual evolution earned plaudits both from the region's political leaders and from a wider scholarly community, which had, in a variety of second track fora, become increasingly imbricated in the emerging arrangement's self-definition. As early as 1990, a characteristically laudatory study of ASEAN considered it 'the most successful regional organization of its kind in the third world' (Frost, 1990, 28). Reviewing the field, in 2004, Anthony Smith maintained that 'the consensus on ASEAN through to the early 1990s amongst many scholars and journalists was that it was a body without parallel in the developing world' (Smith, 2004, 432). In 1997, the Asian Financial Crisis (AFC) briefly disturbed this presumption. The crisis, nevertheless, galvanized the arrangement into deepening its internal integration and projecting its socialization processes into Northeast Asia. By 2000, Peter Katzenstein could declare that East Asian regional integration was 'an idea whose time has come' (Katzenstein, 2000, 361).

Yet, it was not entirely clear whether this greater, ASEAN-inspired community would constitute an 'open region' that embraced a wide variety of states in its vicinity, including Australia, New Zealand, and India as well as, potentially, Canada, Russia, and the United States, or a more exclusively East Asian arrangement – a caucus without Caucasians. The ambiguity concerning the geographical extent of the proposed community reflected a deeper, less advertised, ambivalence about the nature of ASEAN itself. Indeed, from its inception, the organization advanced an expansively inclusive agenda. Aspirant members merely had to subscribe to its norm of non-interference and peaceful resolution of intramural conflicts. Indeed, it remains unclear where, if at all, ASEAN has set the geographical boundaries to its endeavor to drive the international relations between the states of the Asia Pacific.

Optimistic evaluations of an expanded ASEAN framework since 2002 hailed the organization's ability 'to socialize the [East Asian] region with the same norms and values that have proved successful in Southeast Asia' (Smith, 2004, 432). However, China's rise and growing regional assertiveness raised the question whether ASEAN's impact was, in fact, a transformative one. Meanwhile, within ASEAN, the grouping set itself the goal of becoming a (capital 'C') Community in 2015, yet its members have hardly deviated from their course of sovereignty-reinforcing, conservative regionalism. Indeed, the process of expanding the association in the 1990s exacerbated the problem of deepening ASEAN integration after 2002. While ASEAN admitted the northern tier states of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Burma/Myanmar as members in the course of the 1990s, widening membership actually weakened the grouping's coherence in terms of regime types. By 2015 ASEAN comprised: two communist regimes (Laos and Vietnam), two military juntas (Myanmar and Thailand), an absolute monarchy (Brunei), an electoral autocracy (Cambodia), three semi-democratic regimes led by 'princelings' (Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines), and a consolidating democracy (Indonesia). Such disparate regime types rather than facilitating a shared community of fate might instead contribute to the organization's potential for when confronted by external shocks.¹

In order to assess ASEAN's role in sustaining regional security, we shall first assess the claims made on behalf of ASEAN by both scholars and diplomats since its inception. Next, the basic features of weak state realism are presented. Section 2 examines two cases of intramural security, namely interstate conflict management in the case of the Thai-Cambodian border conflict and the trans-boundary haze problem that has affected the countries of maritime Southeast Asia. While a critique of ASEAN's failure to intervene in a territorial conflict between two of its members sets the bar for evaluating the organization's impact arguably high, the incentives to cooperate are higher in the case of a common threat such as environmental pollution, and cooperation correspondingly more likely. In both cases, however, we shall contend, ASEAN-style regionalism has fallen short of meeting the organization's stated aims.

The third part of the paper examines the limits of ASEAN shaping a wider multilateral security community. It deals, first, with ASEAN's diplomatic management of China's claim to the South China Sea. Second, it

1 We thank the fourth referee for suggesting this point.

scrutinizes ASEAN's role in the ASEAN + 3 process. ASEAN's conduct in these cases, we shall argue, reveals that its conflict avoidance formula lends itself to more powerful actors in the Asia Pacific constraining the ASEAN states rather than allowing ASEAN to remain in the 'driving seat' of regional development. Though providing an impetus for regional integration, the weakness of Southeast Asia's states singularly and collectively limits their ability to meet internal challenges effectively or to decrease their external vulnerability.

1.1 ASEAN's long march from "embryonic" to "nascent" security community

The early scholarship on regional security arrangements in Southeast Asia contrasts vividly with more recent commentary regarding the prospects for both an enhanced and more completely integrated ASEAN community. In the 1960s and 1970s, scholars lamented the failure of attempts at regional security cooperation and regarded the eventual formation of ASEAN in 1967 limited in both its scope and utility. For more than a decade after Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978, ASEAN was accused of being a single-issue organization (Caballero Anthony, 2005, 103).

By contrast, International Relations theory of a constructivist, normativist, or liberal institutionalist provenance, which came to dominate the academic study of regional politics in the course of the 1990s, found ontological and epistemological confirmation in the ASEAN process. ASEAN's emergence from the era of *konfrontasi* to the active community-building initiatives that both deepened ASEAN integration and widened the machinery of the APT to embrace a wider Northeast Asia in the 2000s demonstrated institutional adaptation, the construction of shared norms, and a common identity, mediated through, and, manifested in, an 'ASEAN way' (Acharya, 1997). Summarizing this, Amitav Acharya contended that ASEAN's contribution to regionalism is 'ideational, social and normative'. In this context, ASEAN has exercised a 'constraining impact on inter-state conflicts and great power behaviour the strengths [...] of ASEAN's informal regionalism includ[e] the extension of the ASEAN model to East Asia and the Asia Pacific' (Acharya, 2013, 224).

Scholarship went hand in hand with ASEAN's stated aims to become a full-fledged community as first proposed at the Ninth ASEAN summit in Bali in 2003. Inspired by the European Union experience, analysts,

especially in the years following the AFC, pointed optimistically to those ASEAN features that resembled an identity community (Busse, 1999; Khong, 2004). These ideas found their way into ASEAN's rhetorical self-understanding through a network of policy-makers involved in diplomatic track 2/track 1.5 processes led by the nominally academic ASEAN-ISIS institutes (Phar Kim Beng, 2015).² Emanating from ASEAN's agenda of a thousand annual meetings, it has become widely accepted that the organization's flexible consensus has facilitated deeper integration and fostered a regional identity. What is more, since 2010, ASEAN Head of State summits have consistently renewed their calls to maintain ASEAN in the 'driving seat' of building a regional security architecture in East Asia (Caballero-Anthony, 2014; see also the ASEAN Charter, Art. 41). In 2011, Malcolm Cook observed: 'With the United States and Russia joining the East Asia Summit this year, ASEAN's claim to its centrality in East Asian and Asia-Pacific regionalism is confirmed' (Cook, 2011).

Against this prevailing scholarly viewpoint, a number of commentators have nevertheless expressed a degree of skepticism about the efficacy of ASEAN's regional diplomacy. Part of the critique focused on the shallow institutionalization of the regional project (Narine, 2004), and few have directly called its supposed underlying sense of community into question (Roberts, 2007; Nischalke, 2002). Don Emmerson pondered 'what exactly' ASEAN was: 'An organization? A discourse? [...] A concert? A community? [...] Who knows' (Emmerson, 2005), and indeed not many would claim that the organization currently represents a security community in the sense Karl Deutsch understood, where 'dependable expectation of peaceful change' rule out the threat and the use of force (Deutsch, 1957, 5). Avoiding a final judgement in terms of policy outcomes, however, the constructivist-inspired research agenda concerned itself more with the ASEAN process and thus, more with security communities' community dimension rather than with security in the region. Ultimately, the prevailing understanding of ASEAN-driven regionalism thus assumes that a group of weak states engineered a set of procedural norms that stronger states adopted; secondly, these distinctively non-western procedural norms

2 ASEAN-ISIS is legally designated as an NGO and registered with the ASEAN Secretariat. In the preface to the third edition of *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia*, Acharya even claims that: 'the initial articulation of the ASEAN PSC idea was inspired by its first edition'.

socialized the states into new and more inclusive identities, transforming interests, and establishing the basis of a regional community. What are these norms and processes, and by what mechanisms are they implemented?

1.2 Norms, processes, and ASEAN principles

The defining ASEAN norm, identified in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and reaffirmed in the ASEAN Charter, requires non-interference in the affairs of the member states. All who conform to the ASEAN process, therefore, accept the inviolability of national sovereignty.³ Secondly, ASEAN eschews the use of force. The organization resolves disputes peacefully through dialogue, consultation, and negotiation (Charter, Art. 22). The Eminent Persons Group, tasked with drafting the ASEAN Charter, addressed effective conflict resolution mechanisms in particular (ASEAN, 2005, para 4.2) and recommended the establishment of settlement mechanisms in *all* fields of ASEAN cooperation (ASEAN, 2006 para 6). However, the Charter agreed no binding formula and ASEAN's commitment to peaceful conflict resolution depends on the possibility of the Chair or the Secretary-General affording good offices, conciliation, or mediation (Art. 23).

These norms are not unique. The United Nations Charter and the Non-Aligned Movement (1955) expounded them prior to ASEAN's formation. The language of both the original ASEAN Declaration from 1967 and the TAC (1976) thus reflect the internationalist and post-colonial values of the post-war era. Moreover, ASEAN's design drew significantly on the provisions that were developed in Europe.

What, according to the dominant narrative, distinguishes ASEAN's norms is not their content, but their implementation in a framework of regional interaction. The ASEAN way is 'about the *process* through which such interactions are carried out' (Acharya, 1997, 329). It requires the cultivation of certain habits, notably a discreet and informal style of diplomacy, consensus building, and non-confrontational bargaining. In this, ASEAN contrasts with the more formal and often 'intrusive' institutions of European cooperation (Acharya and Johnston, 2007, 2). Instead of the 'adversarial posturing' and 'legalistic decision making procedures' found

3 The TAC was amended in 1987 and again in 1998 to provide 'that States outside Southeast Asia may accede to the Treaty with the consent of all the States in Southeast Asia'. To date 27 extra-ASEAN parties have signed the treaty, including the US, China, Russia and the EU.

in 'western-style' multilateral negotiations (Acharya, 1998, 62), ASEAN seeks to raise the 'comfort level' of its participants, which requires it to avoid open disagreement (*ibid.*, 1997, 329). The comfort process, therefore, means either avoiding bilateral disputes between member states or addressing them obliquely in nonbinding second track fora and dialogue sessions. As former ASEAN Secretary-General Rodolfo Severino explained: 'When ASEAN cannot solve a problem what does it do? First, it may put the problem under the carpet and not highlight it. What is a problem today may cease to be so in the future' (quoted in *ibid.*, 1998, 62).

ASEAN's 'diplomacy of accommodation' (Antolik, 1990) was exported to the ARF and subsequent fora established to manage relations in the wider Asia Pacific, notably ASEAN+3 (1997), the EAS (2005), and ADMM+ (2010). The ARF's Concept Paper envisaged that it would initially focus on confidence building, move to promote preventive diplomacy, and, in a third stage, establish mechanisms for conflict resolution (ARF, 1995). For Kishore Mahbubani, consensus building represents the key to ASEAN's 'unique corporate culture' (Mahbubani, 1995, 116). To be sure, the ARF process promoted conflict avoidance as the basis for discussing issues of wider regional security.⁴ Yet, three decades after its creation, the ARF is struggling to move beyond the Concept Paper's first stage.

This notwithstanding, ASEAN also developed a distinctive intergovernmental structure. Since the fourth ASEAN summit (1992), ASEAN has created an overlapping framework of formal and informal gatherings, at different levels, to discuss policy. The heads of state meetings met on a formal, biennial basis. In between, informal summits are held, the most recent innovation being the defense-focused ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM, since 2006) and its various extensions, which since 2010 engage with a number of extramural states.⁵

The ASEAN Secretariat, headed by its Secretary-General, manages the web of formal and informal summits, dialogues, meetings, and standing committees. The Secretary-General's mandate has responded to the fact that ASEAN policy-making accelerated dramatically in the wake of the

4 For a generally positive assessment of the ARF's 'cautious approach to security cooperation' on regional security, see *inter alia* Haacke (2009).

5 On the ARF defense track and defence diplomacy more generally see Tan (2012).

1997–1998 financial crisis.⁶ The first milestone was the Declaration of ASEAN Concord (Bali Concord II, 2003), which established the framework for an ASEAN Community resting on three pillars: the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the Economic Community (AEC), and the Socio-Cultural Community. This was followed, in 2007, by the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the Establishment of the ASEAN Charter that gave the organization a legal *persona*. Besides, the ASEAN process established a structure governing ASEAN's external trade via Framework Agreements on Economic Partnership with Japan and India, and a Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity with China (2003). By 2014, ASEAN had also concluded trade agreements covering goods and services with China, Australia and New Zealand (2008), and the Republic of Korea (2009). While dismantling trade barriers in itself does not constitute greater integration, in the field of economic regionalism ASEAN adopted a limited number of potentially state autonomy-undermining measures, such as the Vientiane Protocol.

In security matters, however, ASEAN remained firmly committed to ASEAN Way cooperation and non-interference. This entails that close interpersonal ties between leaders and senior governmental figures trump official rules and bureaucratic mechanisms. The cumulative effect of the regional process is thus 'soft' institutionalism, which is the defining characteristic of weak state regionalism.

1.3 *Weak state regionalism*

ASEAN's emphasis on non-intervention reflects the 'subaltern identity' of weak states in the developing world. Lacking domestic capacity, these states are primarily concerned with internal security and the stability of their immediate neighborhood (Buzan, 1992); Weinstein *et al.* (2004). Hence, they offer a meaningful, though still broad, framework to conceptualize state capacity following the standard Weberian definition. Accordingly, weak states suffer from all or some of the following gaps: limits to maintaining domestic order (the security gap); limits in providing basic services and social values (the capacity gap); or ensuring the compliance of the citizenry

6 The *Table of ASEAN Treaties/Agreements and Ratifications* (ASEAN, 2012) runs to 98 pages and reveals that of the 358 Agreements, Declarations, Memorandums of Understanding, Protocols and Treaties governing inter ASEAN conduct or made between the organization and states external to it more than 200 of these have been codified, ratified or declared since 1997.

through consent rather than coercion (the legitimacy gap). States falling short in these capacities, without being able to compensate for the gaps, depend to a large degree on major powers, yet the main drivers of their foreign policies are located at the domestic rather than at the systems level.

At the regional level, domestic sources of shared weakness have been identified as a major source of interstate cooperation both beyond regionalism's European vanguard (Kelly, 2007) and in Southeast Asia in particular (Acharya, 1998a). However, Mohammed Ayoob (1998) also observed that a distinct subaltern realism practiced among weak states ultimately aims at creating national rather than regional identities. Chris Roberts echoed this claiming that the reasons for ASEAN's notably weak identity lie with a lack of political legitimacy and national capacity (2012). In a similar vein, Shaun Narine maintains that the ASEAN way of shaping its practices and structures from infringing upon the sovereignty of its members is 'motivated primarily by nation building concerns' (2009, 371).

Focusing on liberalism's promotion of transnational interdependence through economic transactions, and market linkages, from where it is only a short, theoretical step toward a constructivist understanding of political communities, security community theory avoided or ignored the national, rationalist-material factors underpinning the ASEAN community agenda. Analogously, it fails to comprehend the limitations inherent in the design of regionalism 'light' despite the acknowledgement that ASEAN, from the outset, constituted a project to manage intramural relations rather than to balance against an extramural threat (Acharya, 1998a). Even during the Cambodian war, when ASEAN publicly rallied to counter Vietnam, there was no overriding assumption of a common external threat. ASEAN's intent remained determinedly internal (Storey, 2011). To be sure, Southeast Asia's states have strengthened since and have articulated a louder voice in regional affairs. Yet, the drivers of their international relations have not changed. Even an apparent weakening of the strict adherence to national sovereignty in favor of some political liberalization and the support of human rights principles in the ASEAN Charter ultimately served to bolster national sovereignty by way of enhancing the external legitimacy of the ASEAN states (Katsumata, 2009).⁷ What type of cooperation should we

⁷ In contrast to Northeast Asia, where it is clear that a traditional understanding of Westphalian sovereignty prevails, it is however controversially debated whether the interpretation of sovereignty has changed in Southeast Asia. See Narine (2012).

therefore expect within a group of small states lacking material capacity and possessing limited domestic sources of legitimate statehood?

Southeast Asia's politics depend largely on outcome performance (Alagappa, 1995). The fact that ASEAN identifies its major achievement as moving toward deeper economic integration illustrates the continued importance of development as a major factor for regional security. Rather than region building, ASEAN's members have been concerned primarily with state building. In order to facilitate these conditions, therefore, a low-cost and low-risk diplomacy of informal encounters and nonbinding agreements has served to maintain relatively stable intra-ASEAN relations. The crux of weak state regionalism, however, is that it fails to support the actual goal of its members, to wit strengthening the nation state, and even tends to undermine it. In the absence of effective answers to trans-boundary threats and viable approaches to interstate conflict, states remain vulnerable not only to domestic risks, but in addition to more powerful external actors exploiting them to advance their own interests.

While holding up a declaratory commitment to ASEAN solidarity and deeper integration, ASEAN's officials have also asserted that no one ought to expect them to relinquish sovereignty. This presents an obvious problem for ASEAN's contention that the process of meeting and dialogue in an atmosphere of unstructured informality over time promotes trust, creates shared norms, and induces a shared identity. Despite the enhanced mandate of the ASEAN Secretariat, under the 2007 ASEAN charter, it lacks supranational capacity. Likewise, it is the staff of each member state's ASEAN National Secretariat, housed in their respective foreign ministries, that proposes, and, once accepted by the Heads of State, disposes, policy.

If process serves the 'discursive obfuscation of threat' (Chong, 2011, 147), the same sources of mistrust that prevent deep integration obstruct the evolution of shared identities. The outcome is 'regionalism light', crowded with institutions whose impact upon the regional security framework is low. Although ASEAN's default diplomatic security model has achieved a number of short-term goals, it has failed to achieve the primary objective of alleviating Southeast Asia's domestic and international security dilemmas.

Indeed, the dissonance between an official declaratory intent of deepening ASEAN integration, on the one hand, and actual ASEAN policy practice, on the other, has important ramifications not only for how ASEAN functions but also for the extent to which its regional aspirations may be

realized. The following section explores this dissonance in ASEAN's response to internal security challenges.

2 The ASEAN community and intramural security

Since the end of the Cold War, and especially after 11 September 2001, the so-called non-traditional threats of transnational magnitude found their way onto ASEAN's security agenda. In order to meet them, somewhat contradictorily, the APSC envisages a 'rules-based community' bringing 'ASEAN's political and security cooperation to a higher plane' without, however, interfering with the sovereignty of its members (ASEAN, 2009). The following two case studies examine whether declarations of a common resolve to abstain from the use of force and to overcome intraregional threats have enhanced multilateral cooperation and engendered a denser web of inter-ASEAN security cooperation.

2.1 *Dealing with intramural conflict: Thailand–Cambodia*

Interstate war has not occurred within ASEAN and armed conflict between its members since 1967 has been rare (Tønnesson, 2009). While it is not uncommon to see private and criminal violence leading to skirmishes along many of the region's poorly defined and porous borders, clashes between Thai and Cambodian security forces between 2008 and 2011 represented a disturbing evolution in ASEAN's interstate history. As a Thai foreign affairs official contended, it was 'the first war among ASEAN countries'.⁸ Although actual fighting in the border conflict was limited in time and geographical space, the conflict witnessed the mobilization of large numbers of troops over a three-year period. It claimed the lives of several dozen civilians and troops, damaged civilian infrastructure, and heightened concerns over Cambodia's alleged interference in Thai domestic politics. ASEAN became aware of the conflict as it claimed its first dead in October 2008. However, apart from calls for settling the matter peacefully, it was only when fighting ceased in February 2011 that ASEAN foreign ministers formally convened a special meeting (ASEAN Secretariat News, 2011). Although hailed as a regional initiative at the time, even this initiative failed and Cambodia referred the dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

8 Interview with Virasakdi Futrakul, Bangkok, 14 September 2014.

The conflict over the border around the ancient Khmer temple Preah Vihear [in Thai: Phra Viharn] is rooted in the history of Thai-Cambodian relations predating the colonization of Cambodia.⁹ In 1962, the ICJ awarded ownership of the temple site to Cambodia. However, the border in its immediate surroundings had not been agreed, and the dispute flared up in 2007 when Cambodia sought the temple's listing as a UNESCO World Heritage site. A map annexed to the application file submitted to the World Heritage Committee became a point of contention, as Bangkok feared it would prejudice its claim in the area, which overlapped with the zoning shown on the map. The Thai government withdrew its objection only after the Cambodian government, anxious to have the temple recognized by the UN Committee before national elections scheduled for the same month, agreed to exclude the map from its application. The agreement was formalized in a Joint Communiqué, but upon returning to Bangkok, the Thai delegation, led by foreign minister Noppadon Pattama, was greeted with street protests and charges of treason.

The Communiqué turned the conflict into a 'hostage' of Thailand's color-coded internal politics (Sok Udom Deth, 2014).¹⁰ Ultrationalists and elements of the Yellow Shirt movement, together with the opposition Democrat Party, accused the Thaksin *Thai Rak Thai* government of selling out the national interest for private economic gain. Conscious that the border dispute could exacerbate the unfolding domestic crisis, the Thai government had little room for maneuver with Cambodia. The fact that the Shinawatra family retained close personal and economic ties with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen only complicated matters further.

The conflict became militarized when, on July 15, three activists of the Thai ultranationalist grouping *Dharmayatra* crossed into the disputed area west of the temple, where Cambodian security forces arrested them. Though subsequently released, Thailand sent its border police to assist. Both sides subsequently mobilized troops at the border.

As bilateral talks failed to reverse the delicate situation on the ground, Cambodia mounted a diplomatic campaign. On July 18, it requested an

9 Excellent overviews up to the early proceedings of the ICJ are Kasetsiri *et al.* (2013) and Pawak apan (2013).

10 Thailand's internal struggle broadly pits the establishment's elites against former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and the political associates of the Shinawatra family. At the popular level, his 'Red-Shirt' supporters have rallied around the common cause to promote equal development for a more inclusive democracy.

urgent meeting with the UN Security Council to address the 'grave threat to peace and security in the region'.¹¹ At the same time, it also asked ASEAN to deal with the matter 'informally' in Singapore. Indonesia offered to set up a contact group but Thailand insisted upon bilateral negotiations ([Japan Economic Newswire, 2008](#)). Singapore, as the ASEAN chair, issued a statement urging both parties to exercise restraint. Vietnam, then occupying the monthly presidency of the UN Security Council, reinforced the view that the matter would be dealt with within the region. Under Thai pressure and absent the support of both China and the United States, Cambodian PM Hun Sen eventually withdrew his request for a Security Council meeting.

Late July, 2008, witnessed a military stand-off at two temples located approximately 130 miles away from Preah Vihear ([Government of Cambodia, 2008](#); [Government of Thailand, 2008](#)). In October, the gradually escalating situation in the area led to a shoot-out that left three Cambodian and one Thai soldier dead ([AP, 2008](#)). Despite this escalation, when Thailand occupied the annually rotating ASEAN chair in 2009, it was clear that the organization would avoid the issue. Aware of this, Hun Sen used the October Summit to embarrass his Thai host, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva. A military-brokered coalition government, formed to keep the reconstituted Thaksinite party *Pheua Thai* from power, had appointed Democrat Party leader Abhisit, Prime Minister in 2010. Hun Sen used the ASEAN summit to announce to the world that he had offered disgraced former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin a post as his economic advisor. He also declared that Cambodia would not accede to the Thai government's possible extradition request for Thaksin comparing his treatment with Myanmar's opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi ([Phnom Penh Post, 2009](#)).

The diplomatic row notwithstanding, the border conflict lost its earlier intensity. Street clashes between Red Shirts and anti-Thaksin Yellow Shirts in Bangkok overshadowed the stand-off around Preah Vihear. The Thai government, without a democratic mandate and determined to discredit Thaksin, put bilateral talks on hold. Increasingly frustrated, in August

11 While Cambodia's foreign minister, Hor Namhong, prepared to fly to New York, Secretary of State Kao Kim Hourn was sent to represent Cambodia at the 41st ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Singapore. The letters and further documents referred to are reprinted in [United Nations \(2009\)](#).

2010, Hun Sen requested the new ASEAN chair, Vietnam, to address the issue. Thailand however refused any recourse to the ASEAN charter that would permit ASEAN a mediating role. A Cambodian Secretary of State at the Foreign Ministry concluded, 'we did not expect much; we knew there was nothing Vietnam could do'.¹²

Clashes in early February 2011 again escalated the border dispute. Fighting broke out when Cambodian forces tried to prevent the Thais building a road close to Preah Vihear temple. Cambodian troops fired on Thai bulldozers, and the Thai army responded with heavy artillery. Fighting spread to several locations around the temple site. When the hostilities ceased after less than a week, three Thai and five Cambodians were reported dead and more than a hundred injured.

Minor clashes continued in the following weeks. Cambodia no longer believed that the dispute could be contained within ASEAN and turned once more to the UN. A special Security Council meeting, however, reiterated the call for enhanced bilateral and regional efforts. It also called for a permanent ceasefire, but the UN declined Cambodia's request for UN observers (UNSC, 2011a).

This afforded ASEAN another opportunity to resolve the dispute. Indonesia, occupying the ASEAN chair, sought to arrange talks. Seeking to repair the organization's diminished international image following its lacklustre response to the natural disaster in Myanmar in 2009, Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa asserted that ASEAN was best placed to address the temple dispute (UNSC, 2011b).¹³ After a series of informal negotiations with both the Thai and Cambodian foreign ministers, Natalegawa secured an agreement to deploy a team of military observers to the border's 'affected areas'. 'The biggest problem until then', a senior official at the Indonesian foreign ministry averred, 'was domestic sovereignty: The Thai government could not be seen domestically as comprising its sovereignty by having a third party involved'.¹⁴

The result was a carefully worded statement that referred to Indonesia as 'current chair of ASEAN', permitting it to extend its role in the conflict beyond its 2011 term. Yet several ASEAN members expressed discomfort with even this limited modification of the association's norms. At the

12 Interview with Ouch Borith, Phnom Penh, 26 August 2014.

13 Interview with Hassan Wirajuda, Jakarta, 27 November 2013.

14 Interview Jakarta, 19 December 2013.

ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting to discuss the dispute, only five of the ten principals attended (ICG, 2011).

Cambodia accepted Indonesia's Terms of Reference (ToR) for the observer mission immediately, but Thailand tergiversated. Senior figures in the Thai military made it clear that they would not permit observers in the disputed area. Marty Natalegawa submitted seven further modifications to the proposed ToR, each of which was immediately accepted by the Cambodians.¹⁵ However, the Thai military proved intractable.

In late April, the conflict escalated at the Ta Krabei/Ta Kwai temple sites west of Preah Vihear. Mortar and heavy artillery fire spread to the nearby Ta Muen/Ta Moen temples and the border crossing of O'Smach, destroying infrastructure and displacing more than 40,000 people (DPA, 2011a). According to official Cambodian accounts, 14 soldiers were killed and 94 people injured (Royal Government of Cambodia, n.d., 46). Thailand reported five soldiers dead and more than 100 troops and civilians wounded (Forward Operations Centre of the Second Army Region, 2011; DPA, 2011b).

As the Thai army would not consent to any ASEAN involvement, the Indonesian foreign minister cancelled a planned trip to Thailand. Local commanders eventually agreed a ceasefire.¹⁶ Cambodia, having long threatened to return to the ICJ, now submitted a request for the Court to interpret the 1962 judgment and introduce provisional measures to stabilize the situation on the ground (ICJ, 2011). Indonesia's observer team never arrived, and instead, the proceedings in The Hague and political developments in Bangkok determined the subsequent course of the dispute. In November 2013, the ICJ ruled in favor of Cambodia in regard to the temple and its immediate vicinity. As of the time of writing, the ruling has not been implemented, and the question over the border course beyond the vicinity of the temple remains unresolved.

ASEAN, in other words, offered a framework for Indonesia to broker the conflict when it threatened to turn into a matter of regional concern.¹⁷ However, Thai intransigence meant that it failed to play any role in finding

15 Interview with Var Kim Hong, Phnom Penh, 15 August 2014.

16 Interview with Thawatchai Samutsakorn, 15 September 2014. The interviewer is indebted to Nipat Tonglek for interpreting the conversation.

17 This was merely a coincidence. Brunei was supposed to have held the chair, but the terms were switched.

a way out of the stalemate. Cambodia sought recourse to the United Nations rather than ASEAN, and only after the UN Security Council returned the issue for regional resolution did Cambodia seek ASEAN's involvement. A similar pattern of response holds for other cases where bilateral boundary disputes threatened to escalate into conflict. Instead of relying on regional mechanisms, in order to resolve long-standing disputes, Malaysia preferred with the consent of Indonesia (1998) and Singapore (2003) to resolve differences through the ICJ, rather than ASEAN.

2.2 Meeting trans-boundary challenges: the haze

If outstanding border issues between member states constrain ASEAN's performance as a security community, we should, nevertheless, expect shared norms to enhance regional cooperation against common security threats. However, dissonance between official rhetoric and actual practice also affects ASEAN's response to regionally generated trans-boundary problems like crime, terrorism, or air pollution.

In the case of environmental pollution, Indonesian smallholders and plantation owners constitute the main source of land and forest fires that cause the haze that perennially envelops Singapore and much of peninsular Malaysia (Jones, 2004, 59). To address the problem, ASEAN, following its consensus-seeking norm, convened meetings. The first, in 1990, arrived at the Kuala Lumpur Accord on the Environment and Development. A Regional Action Plan on Transboundary Haze (1995) followed. However, it failed to prevent the 'most extreme, costly and life-threatening' haze of 1997 (Cotton, 1999, 331). In the wake of continuing pollution from forest fires in Kalimantan and Sumatra, these largely ineffectual initiatives gave way to a new ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution in 2002. Although the agreement emphasizes the importance of monitoring and preventing haze pollution, it lacks any mechanism of enforcement. Moreover, the fact that the chief source of pollution, Indonesia, only ratified the agreement in the last days of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's administration in 2014 and the new government of Joko Widodo extended a moratorium on the logging of forest reserves, while offering some hope of progress, has not as yet resolved the issue (Cheam and Manibo, 2014).

Significantly, Singapore's Pollution Standard Index reached an all-time high in June 2013 as the haze emanating from land clearing by timber and oil palm plantation companies in Sumatra and Riau engulfed the region

([Straits Times, 2013a](#)).¹⁸ When the Indonesian minister coordinating the domestic response accused Singapore of 'behaving like a noisy child' about the pollution ([The Australian, 2013](#)), his statement implied that Singapore's reaction breached ASEAN's comfort norm. Fires in the Riau in January 2014 further demonstrated the growing intractability of trans-boundary problems and the ASEAN way's failure to address them. In the event, it prompted Singapore's government to pass a national Transboundary Pollution Bill to prosecute firms registered in Singapore responsible for fires in Indonesia ([Straits Times, 2014b](#)). Commenting on Indonesia's failure to implement the ASEAN agreement, Singapore's environment minister Vivian Balakrishnan observed in February 2014, 'we will try to encourage them to take action, but we all know the welfare of close neighbours is not their priority. [These are the] hard truths of regional politics' ([Jakarta Post, 2014](#)).

Balakrishnan's observation indicates that the attempt to build a security community while simultaneously reasserting the norm of non-interference has exacerbated rather than resolved bilateral tensions. Present concern quickly invokes past grievance. Thus, in the wake of Indonesia's perceived loss of face over the pollution issue, the Indonesian Ministry of Defence announced that it would name one of its new corvettes the *Usman-Harun* after two Indonesian commandos executed in 1968 for bombing Mac Donald House in Singapore's Orchard Road in 1965. The decision heightened, 'suspicions and resentments on both sides' and had 'consequences for bilateral ties' ([Straits Times, 2014a](#)). This hindered effective cooperation especially as Indonesia has traditionally been considered – by itself and by its ASEAN peers – as the region's natural leader.

3 Constructive engagement: ASEAN's extramural security

If ASEAN's approach to internal security looks long on rhetoric and short on implementation, to what extent has ASEAN succeeded in projecting its norms into the wider Asia Pacific? To answer this question, we next examine how ASEAN's normatively driven, nonbinding consensus diplomacy has addressed China's territorial claims to the South China Sea and

18 *CNN* reported that the PSI reached a potentially 'life threatening' level of 400 on 20 June 2013 ([Shadbolt, 2013](#)).

its resources and then scrutinize whether the claim of ASEAN centrality to a broader regional order is sustainable. To this end, we ask whether the organization's diplomacy, via a dense web of high-level encounters, transformed regional flashpoints and turn protracted security issues in its wider domain into disputes susceptible to peaceful resolution.

3.1 *The ASEAN way in the South China Sea*

The source of the South China Sea dispute may be traced to the 1951 San Francisco Treaty, which failed to stipulate possession of the Spratly islands when Japan lost its title to them after its defeat in World War II.¹⁹ The chain of 200 islets, coral reefs, and sea mounts that constitute the Spratly (*Xisha*) and its northern extension the Paracel (*Nansha*) islands spread across 250,000 square kilometres of the South China Sea, a vast continental shelf that constitutes a potentially rich source of oil and natural gas. The Spratly's contested ownership developed into an international conflict when from the mid-1970s on a number of claimants began extracting resources from the seabed contiguous to their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). China, Taiwan, and the four ASEAN states Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam all laid claim and/or occupied part of the islands in the South China Sea. Together with Indonesia, which disputes maritime zones but no islands in the Sea, the parties have failed to resolve their disputes via ASEAN. The organization did, however, apply its consultative machinery to the problem.

In February 1992, China's Law of the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zones laid claim to the entire South China Sea on the basis of its historical right to the area dating from the Xia dynasty 'which reigned between the twenty first and sixteenth centuries B.C.' (Furtado, 1999, 388). In July, ASEAN proclaimed the Manila Declaration, which represented the first premonitory snuffling of the organization's two-decade-long effort to enmesh China into habits of regional good citizenship via nonbinding workshops on Managing Potential Conflicts in the South China Sea. Initiated by Indonesia in 1991 and attended by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam (Odgaard, 2000, 298), after 1994 these workshops became the center piece of ASEAN's collective diplomacy toward China, the ASEAN Regional Forum. In an attempt to engage China in a 'broad security

19 Japan annexed the chain in 1942 as it swept through Southeast Asia.

oriented dialogue', the ARF, too, adopted a 'non-confrontational and process oriented approach' that deferred 'issues that do not lend themselves easily to compromise' (ibid., 2000, 299; Huxley, 1998, 116).

Despite attending the ASEAN colloquies between 1992 and 1999, China rejected any attempts to multilateralize the issue but insisted upon a bilateral approach (Hyer, 1995, 42). Its earlier behavior, between 1970 and 1990, had given little indication of a commitment to peaceful resolution (Huxley, 1998, 115). In 1995, China's occupation of Mischief Reef challenged the Philippine's EEZ claim and furnished ASEAN with further proof of the PRC's forceful approach to recovering its purportedly lost territory.

Although China signed, with reservations, the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) in 1996, attended ASEAN sponsored workshops, and participated in the ARF, the PRC continued to build its presence on the reef. China's increasing power relative to Southeast Asia and its propensity to assert its claims unilaterally presented ASEAN with an obvious security dilemma (ibid.). The dispute brought 'to the fore incompatibilities between the practices China and the countries of Southeast Asia normally employ to ensure peace [...] in their regional environment' (Odgaard, 2000, 292–293).

During the AFC, however, China acted with notable moderation (Guoxing, 1998). This change of tone partly reflected the fact that ASEAN states had seemingly accommodated China's regional ambitions (Odgaard, 2000, 300). Their posture yielded strange, but not entirely unpalatable fruit. Between 1998–2008, China evinced growing comfort with the ASEAN view that intractable disputes should be put to one side and peacefully resolved as intimated in the Manila Declaration and reaffirmed at the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Jakarta in 1996. Beijing's comfort with the ASEAN process culminated in 2002 in the signing of a nonbinding Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. The Declaration reaffirmed UNCLOS, the TAC, and China's Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. It further eschewed the use of force and sought to build an atmosphere of trust and cooperation. In the same year, China and ASEAN agreed a plan of action for an ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity as well as a Framework Agreement on ASEAN-China Economic Cooperation. In 2003, China signed the TAC.

The fact that the Beijing had apparently shifted from norm-avoiding to norm-affirming behavior seemed to support the view that the ASEAN-driven

ARF and APT processes could transform both state interests and regional identity to secure peaceful cooperation via dialogue and consensus (Johnston, 2003). Cheng Chwee Kuik contended that China's attendance at the ARF connoted a paradigm shift in its foreign policy from unilateralism to multilateralism, or, in Chinese terms, 'good neighborliness policy' (*mulin zheng ci*; *ibid.* 2005, 105). From this perspective, China had compromised, limiting 'its own sovereign interests for the sake of engagement in multilateral frameworks and pursuit of greater regional interdependence' (*ibid.*, 76). For Samuel Kim, this showed 'the rise of China as a responsible regional power' conducive to ASEAN-driven regionalism (*ibid.* 2004, 52).

To attribute this shift to the ARF's norm transformation process, however, was somewhat premature. This became increasingly evident after 2010. Between 1998 and 2008, China had switched from 'frown' to 'smile' diplomacy (Hyer, 1995) due to prudential calculations of China's politburo and the fourth generation leadership of Hu Jintao. The hard line had pursued prior to 1998 had raised the undesirable possibility of US involvement in the Spratly dispute, which China preferred to treat as a neighborhood watch issue. Instead, by appearing to adopt ASEAN's non-confrontational approach, China could draw ASEAN into its sphere of influence while a regionally distinctive ASEAN way side-lined the United States (*ibid.*; Austin, 2003). In addition, the soft line had the positive side-effect of quarantining the problem of Taiwan, which, significantly, was excluded from the 2002 Declaration. While the actual resolution of the South China Sea dispute remained stuck in the ARF's preferred managerial mode, the emphasis upon norms had become an exercise in public relations (Buszynski, 2003, 359).

The shift between soft and hard lines became evident once more as China's economy flourished, while financial crisis embroiled the West between 2008 and 2014. In the context of the tensions accompanying the transition from the fourth to the fifth generation of the politburo leadership, a new assertiveness increasingly assumed a maritime as well as a territorial dimension. With the rapid modernization of the force projection capacity of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) under fifth-generation leader Xi Jinping, his 'China Dream' could potentially become a reality. Consequently, from 2012, the politburo and the PLAN shifted from charm to a more forceful reassertion of claims to the Spratly islands (Financial Times, 2012). The issue came to a head in April 2012, when PLAN vessels confronted the Philippine navy over the detention of Chinese trawlers fishing in the Scarborough shoals within the Philippine

EEZ. This stand-off and the growing international awareness of China's blue water capacity for ultimately controlling the South China Sea exposed ASEAN's diplomatic limitations. China further fuelled uncertainty by promulgating a nine dash line map²⁰ that claimed almost 90 percent of the South China Sea.

In this context, ASEAN came to suffer the effects of weak states' regionalism. Both the Philippines, and more remarkably, Vietnam, looked increasingly to the United States when confronted by China's renewed assertiveness. The ARF process demonstrated impotence rather than collective strength. Meeting in Phnom Penh in July 2012, ASEAN foreign ministers could not agree the most cosmetic of joint communiqués on regional security. Although the meeting was supposed to announce agreement on a multilateral code of conduct to address the South China Sea disputes, the Cambodian Chair of the ASEAN summit overruled the announcement. China, as one diplomat cynically observed, had 'bought the chair' (Perlez, 2012), 'breach[ing] in the dyke of regional autonomy' (Reuters, 2012). The event in Phnom Penh illustrated how a Chinese fifth column of client states (Burma–Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia) offered a potential 'foretaste of bloc formation to come' (Brown, 2012).

As the situation evolved between 2012 and 15, China continued its 'smile and frown', or 'push and pull' diplomacy (Avendano, 2013; Ha Anh Tuan, 2014, 191) further fragmenting ASEAN's attempt at a collective response. At the East Asian Summit in Brunei in October 2013, the PRC adopted a soft line proposing a new treaty of friendship and cooperation with ASEAN. The new treaty, the Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang contended, would usher in a 'diamond decade'. As *The Straits Times* observed, 'the implicit message was that China had sufficiently deep pockets to back up its diamond decade' with a 'slew of sweeteners in the form of billion dollars of development projects' (Straits Times, 2013b).

The ASEAN response, however, was tepid. Officially, ASEAN still sought a code of conduct for the South China Sea, which China refused. Meanwhile, in 2013, the Philippine President Benigno Aquino decided to refer its dispute with China to the international court at The Hague under UNCLOS. In a similar vein, when in May 2014 China positioned a

20 The map was based on a 1947 eleven dash 'location map of the South China Sea islands' and was subsequently expanded to 10 dashes. See Kazianis (2014).

CNOOC oil rig in Vietnam's EEZ, Vietnam responded by also threatening to internationalize the dispute.

China's promotion of economic incentives coupled with naval aggression indicated Xi's strategy of 'proactive assertiveness'. As Bonnie Glaser and Deep Lal explain, '[i]n the near term, China's leaders anticipate some resistance. Over time, however, they calculate that their growing leverage will be sufficient to persuade weaker and vulnerable neighbours to accede to China's territorial demands' (ibid. 2014, 2). Thus, China pursued a salami slicing strategy taking control in the South China Seas in small increments by making the economic costs of resistance too high. Rather than push and pull, therefore, China views its economic and security interests working in tandem in its relations with ASEAN in terms of economic and security integration. Thus, China pursues a policy of maritime assertiveness in order to consolidate its economic well-being (Cole, 2013, 197). In the process, however, it intimates a 'sea change' in the regional strategic balance. Indeed, 'the South China Sea is the first place where Chinese ambition comes face to face with American strategic resolve' (Hayton, 2014, xvi).

Hence, although Chinese premier Li Keqiang envisages the East Asian Community as one of 'common destiny' (*ming yun gong tong ti*), it is also from a Chinese perspective, one of asymmetric dependence. Here, China's understanding of regionalism, unlike ASEAN's multilateral approach, assumes a Chinese core operating across an ASEAN periphery. The relationship is one of reciprocity, but failure to respect China's claims invokes sanctions. Thus, when the Philippines and Vietnam rejected China's interpretation of its history and territory, they suffer Chinese sanctions in terms of investment and market access.

Such assertiveness has led both to the fragmentation of ASEAN unity and the growing involvement of both Japan and the United States in the developing conflict. At the Shangri-La security dialogue in Singapore in June 2014, US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel remarked that 'the US policy is clear. We take no position on competing territorial claims. But we firmly oppose any nation's use of intimidation, coercion or the threat of force to assist those claims' (quoted in Sheridan, 2014). At the same meeting, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced that Japan would provide the Philippines and Vietnam with naval patrol vessels.

By the following year's Shangri-La security dialogue, China had further escalated tension by its aggressive land reclamation program in the South China Sea. US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter considered China's

actions 'out of step with the international norms that underscore the Asia Pacific security architecture' (cited in [The Economist, 2015](#)). Meanwhile, the ASEAN states rather than driving regional processes seemed increasingly located between a rock and a hard place, trying to avoid making a choice between backing a more assertive United States and backing China. As former ASEAN Secretary-General Ong Keng Yong observed 'in crude terms', China was 'doing divide and rule' ([Financial Times, 2015](#)).

The South China Sea dispute thus ultimately demonstrates how more powerful actors can manipulate ASEAN's soft norms to advance grand strategic interests. The strategic maneuvering brought about by the ARF process, furthermore, has complicated the relationship between the United States, the three Northeast Asian states, and ASEAN in ways that ASEAN diplomacy failed to foresee. It is the evolving character of the regional dilemma between the United States and its regional contenders, Japan and China, played through ASEAN's processes that we next explore.

3.2 ASEAN plus three and ASEAN's security dilemma

ASEAN Plus Three assumes that the involvement of a triumvirate of regional powers – China, Japan and South Korea – and the association would evolve into an integrated East Asian economic and security community. This assumption begs the question whether such a community can function without the participation of the United States. Inherent in ASEAN aspirations, dating from the 1971 announcement of a Zone of Peace Freedom and Neutrality, has been the enhancement of regional integration free from great power interference. The logical inference, prior to the western financial crisis of 2008, was the exclusion of the United States from the evolving East Asian Community. Significantly, Washington was not invited to its inaugural meeting in Kuala Lumpur in December 2005.

Given that China increasingly presents itself as the United States' successor in terms of regional economic and maritime power, this represented something of a strategic gaff ([Cole, 2013](#), 197–200). For half a century, the United States, as an external balancer, had offset the potentially destabilizing rivalries of the region's major powers, Japan and China. ASEAN's more perceptive diplomats covertly acknowledged the importance of the US role in practice, if not in security community theory. This reliance on the US presence while simultaneously advocating schemes for regional resilience that required, over an unspecified period, a diminution of US

power in Asia, was a contradiction that neither ASEAN diplomacy or its scholarship adequately addressed.

The fact that before 2008 an exclusive pan-Asian view enjoyed semi-official currency reinforced the sense that ASEAN's wider regional security policy lacked coherence. To bandwagon with China against the United States undermined the ostensible purpose for which the ARF and APT processes were devised, namely, to educate an irredentist China in 'good regional citizenship' (Leifer, 1995, 34). Unwilling to address this pitfall, the APT resorted to mixed messaging (Acharya, 1997, 329) which in practice meant avoiding difficult problems while simultaneously extolling East Asian solidarity. How does this behavior affect the ASEAN-led process of East Asian Community building?

3.3 Not ASEAN plus three, but one plus ASEAN

Two answers may be posited to this question. Firstly, East Asian diplomatic solidarity comes cheap. The price for disporting an ostensible commitment to regional cohesion is negligible, and forging trade agreements, making declarations, or signing the TAC is relatively cost free. Thus, in 2011 even the Obama administration decided it was worth signing the TAC to gain access to East Asian summitry. At the same time, the governing principle of non-interference embodied in the TAC is congenial to Asia's assorted authoritarian or semi-democratic governments. ASEAN has thus provided a convenient umbrella for regimes to legitimize their international standing through either formal membership or by degrees of association.

Secondly, ASEAN scholarship is solipsistic, viewing East Asian diplomacy through the lens of ASEAN. ASEAN has limited relevance to the economic and political interests of the more powerful Northeast Asian economies. By contrast, the international relations and political economy of Northeast Asia and the United States possess considerable significance for ASEAN. The utility of the ARF or APT has ultimately rested in the attempt to enmesh Northeast Asian states generally, and China in particular, in a web of multilateral consensus. However, far from preventing the adventurism of more powerful states, ASEAN Plus Three provided the vehicle for China and, to a lesser extent, Japan, to vie for influence over Southeast Asia.

A brief examination of ASEAN's history reveals this function to mask the play of interests between greater powers. Between 1978 and 1990, ASEAN served as a proxy for the United States and China to agree conditions for the Soviet retreat from Southeast Asia and the resolution of the Cambodian crisis.²¹ Over the same period, Japanese foreign policy also sought to increase its soft power influence in Southeast Asia via ASEAN through economic investment. In the immediate post-Cold War era, China's rise complicated the interplay of Northeast Asian power in Southeast Asia. Initially, China treated ASEAN and its multilateral initiatives with suspicion, considering it a US inspired framework to contain it (Wang Jisi, 1997, 10–11). ASEAN's growing concern at China's creeping assertiveness in the South China Sea inspired the formation of the ARF (Valencia, 1995). The interaction, however, resulted in consequences far more unintended than either China or ASEAN could have anticipated.

After 1997, the response to the Asian economic crisis notably sharpened Sino-Japanese rivalry for influence in Southeast Asian. China's rise and its increasing assertiveness in a number of territorial disputes had already impacted negatively on Japan's regional standing. The fact that China had increased its leverage over Southeast Asia in the aftermath of the economic crisis thus elicited a countervailing response. This assumed the form of the Miyazawa and Obuchi-ASEAN Initiatives in 1998 and 1999 to facilitate regional recovery.

The mounting Sino-Japanese competition for regional economic influence explains their mutual interest in the APT. The APT as well as the East Asian Community summit of 2005 thus erected a stage upon which the major powers of Northeast Asia could vie for the leadership of the region. Indeed, Japan had few illusions that it gave China 'an ideal framework within which it can exercise its influence, making it easier for China to play a leading role in forming a free-trade area in East Asia' (NIDS, 2003, 210). Japan thus viewed China's participation in the APT and its promotion of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership not as a prelude to deeper regional integration, but a strategy to diminish Japanese regional influence. In order to avert this outcome, Tokyo sought to reignite its influence by 'cooperating' with the ASEAN members in terms of investment,

21 ASEAN played only a secondary role in the events leading to the Paris agreement of 1991. In fact the resolution of the crisis represented a classic case of great power politics. See Kissinger (1994, 792).

technology, and security, because only ‘through such measures, can Japan match the growing influence of China’ (ibid., 213).

Ultimately, constructing a shared East Asian Community has little to do with constructing a shared regional identity and a lot to do with the realist pursuit of state interests via the East Asian summit mechanism, which China treats increasingly as a 1 plus ASEAN forum.

4 Conclusion: norms are what strong states make of them

ASEAN’s move toward a cultural, economic, and political and security community and its extension into the ASEAN-driven APT process after 1997 tests the dominant assumptions in ASEAN scholarship that maintains a socialization process would transform state interests into shared norms creating the ideational basis of a shared identity. Nation speaking unto nation would see nations evolving progressively into post-national constellations. This historicist teleology that came to influence the discipline of international relations after the Cold War found its exemplification in the evolution of ASEAN and its putative mutation into an East Asian Community.

Problematically, however, we found that ASEAN’s weak state regionalism continues to be a conservative one. Those who advanced the view that ASEAN had evolved into an embryonic security community attended closely to official rhetoric and the conduct of ASEAN summitry. Yet, they overlooked the fact that the statements made by East Asian political leaders affirming a common interest needed ‘to be read in the particular context in which they were made’ (Ravenhill, 2002, 175).

The case studies examined here reveal that ASEAN’s crucial norm of non-interference and its practice of nonbinding consensus inhibit deeper integration either within ASEAN or the wider East Asian region. Moreover, the contradiction between official consensus and actual practice has a damaging effect. The longevity of the institutional arrangement by no means entails progress, but rather the recourse to process without resolution. Protracted disputes and simmering suspicions render the use of force, an option that is not ruled out in ASEAN’s community and forestalls effective means to advance human security. Even when shifting the focus from outcomes to ostensibly more relevant process variables, ASEAN’s role to promote a regional public good in the examined cases

was, at best, limited. If interstate war is indeed highly unlikely between any of the ASEAN states, this is not attributable to a liberal or ideational community but above all to the lack of meaningful capacity.

Following the essentially intergovernmental practice of the security regime, states pursue bilateral or trilateral arrangements rather than building a supranational practice in dealing with intramural security. Meanwhile, extending conflict avoidance strategies to a wider East Asian Community has not altered the strategic reality of the individual and collective weakness of ASEAN. As a result, ASEAN appears doomed to remain a collection of weak and increasingly friable states in the twenty-first century. In fact what seems to be a Japanese and Chinese acculturation to the ASEAN Way has had a perverse effect, as these powers manipulate ASEAN's pliable norms for their own strategic advantage. Consequently, ASEAN states either seek to bandwagon with a rising China that eschews any multilateral or legally binding code covering disputes over the South China Sea or hedges its bets by trying to maintain the regional presence of a declining and distracted US superpower. Whatever strategic mutation ASEAN eventually assumes, it can only mask the fact that weaker states cannot shape the fate of stronger ones.

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