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ASEAN Centrality and Regional Security

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Introduction

The regional security environment of the Asia-Pacific region is evolving. Changing power dynamics and new security challenges are looming over the strategic horizon. Cooperation among all nations, regardless of their size, is necessary to ensure a more prosperous and secure future. As such, it is imperative that there is continuing and consistent strategic dialogue to explore how to navigate the challenging currents of today's security environment.

This policy brief¹ aims to discuss a specific security concept that has played a key role in security governance: ASEAN Centrality. In particular, this paper discusses what ASEAN Centrality is, the role of ASEAN in the regional security architecture, and offers some policy considerations with respect to the prospects of multilateralism in the region.

Understanding ASEAN Centrality

ASEAN or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations is arguably one of the most diverse regional organizations in the world. ASEAN has ten members: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Viet Nam. Collectively, these countries are characterized by its vast diversity of domestic political traditions, and varying levels of economic development.

ASEAN was founded on 8 August 1967 through the signing of the Bangkok Declaration. A key objective of ASEAN, as outlined in the Bangkok Declaration, is “[t]o promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries of the region and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter.”²

ASEAN's promotion of open regionalism complements efforts in building an inclusive Asia-Pacific region.

To meet its objectives, ASEAN operates largely through the principles of consultation and consensus. These principles of regional cooperation have been enshrined in various treaties, particularly the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), and the ASEAN Charter. The TAC provides:

“In their relations with one another, the High Contracting Parties shall be guided by the following fundamental principles : a) Mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity of all nations; b) The right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion; c) Non-interference in the internal affairs of one another; d) Settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful means; e) Renunciation of the threat or use of force; f) Effective cooperation among themselves.”³

The ASEAN Charter also outlines various principles of regional cooperation, namely:

“(a) respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial

integrity and national identity of all ASEAN Member States;

(b) shared commitment and collective responsibility in enhancing regional peace, security and prosperity;

(c) renunciation of aggression and of the threat or use of force or other actions in any manner inconsistent with international law;

(d) reliance on peaceful settlement of disputes;

(e) non-interference in the internal affairs of ASEAN Member States;

(f) respect for the right of every Member State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion and coercion;

(g) enhanced consultations on matters seriously affecting the common interest of ASEAN;

(h) adherence to the rule of law, good governance, the principles of democracy and constitutional government;

(i) respect for fundamental freedoms, the promotion and protection of human rights, and the promotion of social justice;

(j) upholding the United Nations Charter and international law, including international humanitarian law, subscribed to by ASEAN Member States;

(k) abstention from participation in any policy or activity, including the use of its territory, pursued by any ASEAN Member State or non-ASEAN State or any non-State actor, which threatens the sovereignty, territorial integrity or political and economic stability of ASEAN Member States;

(l) respect for the different cultures, languages and religions of the peoples of ASEAN, while emphasising their common values in the spirit of unity in diversity;

(m) the centrality of ASEAN in external political, economic, social and cultural relations while remaining actively engaged, outward-looking, inclusive and non-discriminatory; and

(n) adherence to multilateral trade rules and ASEAN's rules-based regimes for effective implementation of economic commitments and progressive reduction towards elimination of all barriers to regional economic

integration, in a market-driven economy.”⁴

By placing premium on the principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of each other, as well as by decision-making through consultation and consensus, ASEAN made itself one of the key players in the multilateral affairs of the region. Indeed, coupled by the member-states' diversity, these various principles of cooperation gave credence to ASEAN's credibility as an inclusive international organization upon which other platforms of regional cooperation are anchored.

ASEAN in the Regional Security Architecture

In the post-Cold War era, ASEAN increasingly played the role as an “honest broker” in promoting multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly in providing platforms for dialogue and cooperation in addressing non-traditional security issues.

ASEAN's role in global governance can be seen in two fronts. First, in terms of membership, ASEAN-led platforms have a broad membership. While such platforms are not global in terms of membership, the membership nonetheless covers the major global players, particularly the United States (US), China, the European Union (EU), Russia, among others. Second, ASEAN plays a key role particularly in terms of non-traditional security cooperation.

ASEAN is at the center of various platforms for regional security dialogue and cooperation, particularly the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), and East Asia Summit (EAS).

ARF is arguably the most inclusive ASEAN-led platform in the Asia-Pacific region. The objective of the ARF is “to foster constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and concern,” and “to make significant contributions to efforts towards confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region.”

Founded in 1994, ARF has the following members: Australia, Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Canada, China, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), EU, India,

Indonesia, Japan, Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Russia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor-Leste, US, and Viet Nam. The membership of the ARF alone suggests the extent of inclusivity which ASEAN seeks to promote. The two Koreas are members of ARF, as well as China, India, and Pakistan—all of which have a history of armed conflict with each other. Indeed, ASEAN promotes an open regionalism.

Founded in 2010, the ADMM-Plus is another platform for security cooperation in the region. While ARF is led by the foreign ministers, the ADMM-Plus, as its name suggests, is led by the defense establishments of the ASEAN Member States (AMS) and of the following dialogue partners: Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, ROK, Russian Federation and the United States. The objectives of the ADMM-Plus are as follows: 1) to benefit ASEAN member countries in building capacity to address shared security challenges, while cognisant of the differing capacities of various ASEAN countries; 2) to promote mutual trust and confidence between defence establishments through greater dialogue and transparency; 3) to enhance regional peace and stability through cooperation in defence and security, in view of the transnational security challenges the region faces; 4) to contribute to the realisation of an ASEAN Security Community which, as stipulated in the Bali Concord II, embodies ASEAN's aspiration to achieve peace, stability, democracy and prosperity in the region where ASEAN member countries live at peace with one another and with the world at large; 5) to facilitate the implementation of the Vientiane Action Programme, which calls for ASEAN to build a peaceful, secure and prosperous ASEAN, and to adopt greater outward-looking external relation strategies with our friends and Dialogue Partners.

To operationalize these objectives, the ADMM-Plus has a total of seven (7) Expert Working Groups (EWGs) for the following issues: 1) humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR);

2) maritime security; 3) military medicine; 4) counter-terrorism; 5) peacekeeping operations; 6) humanitarian mine action; and 7) cybersecurity.

Founded in 2005, the EAS includes the AMS and the following members: Australia, China, Japan, India, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia and the United States. Hosted by Malaysia, the first EAS Summit also issued the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the EAS which outlines the priority of the ASEAN-led body:

“(a) Fostering strategic dialogue and promoting cooperation in political and security issues to ensure that our countries can live at peace with one another and with the world at large in a just, democratic and harmonious environment;

(b) Promoting development, financial stability, energy security, economic integration and growth, eradicating poverty and narrowing the development gap in East Asia, through technology transfer and infrastructure development, capacity building, good governance and humanitarian assistance and promoting financial links, trade and investment expansion and liberalisation; and

(c) Promoting deeper cultural understanding, people-to-people contact and enhanced cooperation in uplifting the lives and well-being of our peoples in order to foster mutual trust and solidarity as well as promoting fields such as environmental protection, prevention of infectious diseases and natural disaster mitigation.”⁵

The Chairmanship of the ARF, EAS, and ADMM-Plus all coincide with the AMS that holds the ASEAN Chairmanship.

ASEAN has consistently been inclusive, consultative, and open to engaging a wide array of non-ASEAN stakeholders, including global powers.

Policy Considerations

In the Asia-Pacific region, there are indeed undeniable shifts in the dynamics of major power relations.

ASEAN provides some measure of stability amidst the uncertainties of regional power shifts through its efforts in institutionalizing the three pillars of ASEAN Community-Building (Political-Security Community, Economic Community, Socio-Cultural Community) and the ASEAN Way of diplomatic interaction, as enshrined in the ASEAN Charter. The Charter marks a crucial milestone in ASEAN's forward march towards a more cohesive community where platforms for diplomacy across a wide spectrum of government and non-government sectors are strengthened and regularized. ASEAN community-building involves not just the executive organs and official channels of diplomacy, but also parliamentarians, economic and business groups, think-tanks, and non-government organizations, among many others. ASEAN now has a pervasive presence in many aspects of governance in Southeast Asia. This arrangement promises to put onboard as much voices and perspectives as possible from across the Southeast Asian region.

With community-building taking a firm foothold in the most important sectors in Southeast Asia, the organizational cohesion envisioned by the Charter is gradually achieved, thereby contributing to a more solid and amplified ASEAN voice in the wider Asia-Pacific. ASEAN's organizational integrity provides the necessary diplomatic gravitas in exercising solid leadership in multilateral affairs in the Asia-Pacific. ASEAN's internal cohesion lends significant credence to ASEAN's organizational neutrality in dealing with major global powers and championing the cause of international peace and stability. Naturally, power shifts will entail some strains, or even occasional tensions, among regional stakeholders. However, it remains to be seen if ASEAN can be as united and firm in managing conflict and preserving avenues for diplomacy, especially during the most difficult political climate can the organization exercise leadership to diplomatically pull regional actors away from the brink of disaster and violence. It is therefore in the interest of global players to support ongoing efforts in ASEAN for community-building. A cohesive and consultative regional organization is more likely to be able to exercise effective, inclusive, and neutral,

and non-confrontational leadership in regional multilateral diplomacy.

Conclusion

ASEAN's promotion of open regionalism complements efforts in building an inclusive Asia-Pacific region. Indeed, ASEAN and ASEAN-led platforms can be seen as a church open to all faiths. Perhaps as a consequence of the organization's internal diversity in terms of political traditions and levels of economic development, ASEAN has consistently been inclusive, consultative, and open to engaging a wide array of non-ASEAN stakeholders, including global powers. In numerous occasions, ASEAN has vowed to promote mutual respect and non-interference in internal affairs, thereby posturing itself as an organization that does not discriminate on the basis of domestic political systems and economic status. This openness creates a harmonious environment conducive to dialogue and adjustments, matters that sometimes need to stay away from the glare of media cameras and myopic commentaries.

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Endnotes

¹ This Executive Policy Brief is based on the author's presentation delivered at the Second Wanshou Dialogue on Global Security: "Addressing Global Security Governance under New Circumstances" during the Session/Panel on "Evolution of Security Concepts and Global Security Governance" held in Beijing, People's Republic of China on 2-3 July 2019.

² ASEAN Bangkok Declaration, Paragraph 2.

³ Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, Article 2.

⁴ ASEAN Charter, Article 2.

⁵ Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the East Asia Summit, Paragraph 4