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# IS ASIA-PACIFIC REGIONALISM OUTGROWING ASEAN?

SEE SENG TAN

**ASEAN has proved an enduring regional architecture, but the Asia-Pacific increasingly faces a series of interrelated political and security challenges for which the organisation may be outmoded. See Seng Tan asks whether ASEAN centrality enhances regionalism or merely rationalises the status quo in which it enjoys pride of place.**

Since the end of the Cold War, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a sub-regional grouping whose remit and influence far exceeds the geographical limits of Southeast Asia, has played a definitive part in shaping regional security and the institutional architecture servicing the Asia-Pacific. It still does. At the forty-third ASEAN ministerial meeting in Hanoi in July 2010, polite and politic reaffirmations were made by ASEAN's dialogue-partner countries concerning 'their unequivocal support for ASEAN centrality' and their declared hope that 'ASEAN would continue to play a central role in the emerging regional architecture'.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, the prospect of ASEAN's unremitting centrality in Asia-Pacific regionalism has also led other regional stakeholders to ask: 'at what price?' For them, as well as concerned observers in general, a host of political and strategic limitations and institutional weaknesses threaten to constrain the ability of the ASEAN-led regional architecture to cope with rising demands in a region increasingly defined by a host of complex challenges – both natural and man-made, traditional and non-traditional. How Asia-Pacific regionalism can effectively respond to doubts over its relevance holds serious implications for the region's security.

## ASEAN and Asia-Pacific Regionalism

ASEAN's contributions to conflict prevention in Southeast Asia have been decidedly mixed. Despite a respectable

history in confidence-building and preventive diplomacy among ASEAN states, bilateral tensions persist between some member countries, leading in recent times to tense confrontations and minor skirmishes (such as the Indonesian-Malaysian dispute over Ambalat in 2005, or the Cambodian-Thai standoff involving the area surrounding the eleventh-century Preah Vihear Temple in 2008). In security discussions on the South China Sea disputes, co-operation between ASEAN and China facilitated progress towards the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea signed in 2002, but subsequent efforts to develop an actual code of conduct have stalled.<sup>2</sup> And while ASEAN-styled constructive engagement paved the way for the inflow of humanitarian assistance into Myanmar in the wake of Cyclone Nargis in May 2008 – a development initially resisted by the country's ruling junta until ASEAN assumed the role of conduit – the Association's effectiveness has inhibited any influence it might have had on the Burmese generals towards greater political openness in Myanmar.<sup>3</sup>

At the wider regional level, ASEAN's track record in the 'driving seat' of Asia-Pacific regionalism is likewise spotty. Certainly, the story of the post-Cold War proliferation of institutions in the Asia-Pacific has been nothing short of spectacular; from roughly the end of the Cold War to the present, the Asia-Pacific has been transformed from a sparsely institutionalised region to one teeming with myriad multilateral arrangements. With the exception of

the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) trade forum, the rest arose as ASEAN-led initiatives and bear its imprimatur, notably the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF); the ASEAN plus China, Japan and South Korea (ASEAN+3); the East Asia Summit (EAS, also known as the ASEAN+8, with America and Russia as its newest members) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus Eight<sup>4</sup> (ADMM+8). In themselves, they do not constitute distinct regionalisms as much as facets of an all-encompassing albeit incoherent regionalism. As Stephan Haggard once put it, collectively they make up the 'ASEAN institutional complex' serving the Asia-Pacific.

Yet doubts linger over the efficacy of these institutions in helping the region grapple with increasingly complex challenges, most bearing serious transnational if not region-wide ramifications. Asia-Pacific institutions are, to varying extents, re-tooling themselves to better manage non-traditional security problems. The ARF, for example, is re-orientating its focus towards practical co-operation on concerns such as disaster management, maritime security, counter-terrorism and nuclear proliferation; while the ADMM+8 has emphasised capacity-building with assistance from dialogue partners.<sup>5</sup> Be that as it may, few – not even Asians themselves, according to a 2009 survey of regional elites conducted by a Washington-based think tank<sup>6</sup> – are willing to count on the 'ASEAN institutional complex' and its components as providers, much less guarantors, of the region's security.



US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, left, talks with Vietnam's President Nguyen Minh Triet during the East Asia Summit meeting on 30 October 2010 in Hanoi, Vietnam. Photo courtesy of Evan Vucci/AP.

At the same time, alternative visions of the regional architecture – such as Washington's proposal to transform the Six-Party Talks into a permanent security forum servicing Northeast Asia (2008), Canberra's bid for an 'Asia-Pacific community' (May 2008) and Tokyo's idea of an 'East Asian community' (September 2009) – have worried if not upset ASEAN leaders, who fear a prospective sidelining of ASEAN-based institutions.

### ASEAN Centrality

One reason for regional distrust in ASEAN-led institutions lies in the immense obstacles that lie in the way of regional co-operation and integration. This much is obvious, say, with the seventeen year old ARF's inability or reluctance to move beyond confidence-building and adopt a preventive diplomacy agenda (an ARF objective); or the apparent aimlessness of the EAS given disagreements among member nations over the Summit's mandate and representation.<sup>7</sup> Although it is unfair to hold ASEAN solely responsible for the lack of progress in these institutions – their non-ASEAN members have been equally complicit in this regard – it is nonetheless ASEAN's preoccupation with preserving its privileged position in these arrangements that has led to reassessments of the 'structural anomaly' of contemporary Asia-Pacific regionalism.

In other words, the fact that global and regional great powers participate in a regional architecture led by a sub-regional grouping of Southeast Asian states. The Asia-Pacific's institutional architecture (ASEAN-led) and its security order ('co-managed' by great powers and ASEAN) is hence fairly incongruous.

It is not entirely obvious that the aura of indispensability which has long shrouded ASEAN is deserved. Key opinion-shapers (including two former prime ministers) have recently added their voices to the academic chorus calling for a new regional architecture for the Asia-Pacific. They question the place, role and method of ASEAN in Asia-Pacific regionalism, raising concerns about particular limitations which, if left unresolved, could prove inimical to the search for a more stable, peaceful and prosperous Asia-Pacific. While few critics dispute ASEAN's putative contributions to regional security, they nonetheless see the extant Asia-Pacific regionalism as inherently limited and likely unable to cope with the growing inventory of complex interrelated challenges affecting the region today. But even as the Association's on-and-off struggles with internal disunity and impotence raise doubts about its leadership and relevance in regional affairs, the outward consensus on ASEAN's centrality has held, for the

most part, among its regional partners. While this obviously has not precluded other regional states from starting their own regional initiatives, the courtesy of consulting with ASEAN before embarking on such enterprises has hitherto been more or less observed. However, signs that the consensus is under stress are growing. The nub of the matter is less the issue of ASEAN centrality itself than whether that centrality is a means of enhancing regionalism, or a rationalisation of the regional status quo in which the Association enjoys pride of place.

Whether an ASEAN-led regionalism in the Asia-Pacific can satisfy growing regional expectations is dependent on the region's ability to overcome a number of constraints. At least three limitations, broadly defined, are noteworthy.

### Regionalism-Lite

The first limitation has to do with institutional minimalism in Asia-Pacific regionalism. Although the region certainly can no longer be accused of being short on institutions,<sup>8</sup> the density, deepening and intrusiveness of the region's architecture continues to lag behind that of Europe. No longer 'regionalism-light', as it were – a contemporary landscape crowded with institutions argues against that – the Asia-Pacific remains

regionalism-*lite* in terms of the design and efficacy of its institutions (although not all stakeholders see minimalism as a weakness).<sup>9</sup> For the most part, regional countries have been unwilling to invest resources commensurate to their express collective visions and proposals for regionalism.

Concerns over the 'liteness' of Asia-Pacific institutions – and, crucially, the contribution of ASEAN to this state of affairs – form the basis of regional visions proffered by Australia and Japan. The motivation behind Australia's proposal – an overarching organisation that would serve as a kind of 'one stop shop' for all things Asia-Pacific – was a concern over the absence of any single institution with a membership sufficiently representative, and a mandate suitably comprehensive, to encompass the entire Asia-Pacific.<sup>10</sup> The Japanese proposal envisaged a regional institution modelled on the European Union. A different proposal drafted by a Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC) task force on regional institutional architecture called for the establishment of an 'Asia-Pacific Summit' comprising the nineteen APEC member countries and India for high-level discussions on key issues.<sup>11</sup> The proposals reiterated a longstanding concern for the lack of coherence in regional architecture.

Critics insist that the fault lies in part with ASEAN which, in their view, initiated (or, in the case of APEC, supported) an institution-building spree that privileged form over function and content. The consequence is a messy, incrementally enhanced and heavily compartmentalised architecture comprising institutions formed on purely ad hoc considerations.<sup>12</sup> Yet non-ASEAN states bear a measure of responsibility as well; for example, little is made today of China's initial enthusiasm for the EAS in light of its current coolness towards the Summit.<sup>13</sup> While the proposals' authors accept that (most) existing regional institutions are here to stay, they also call for arrangements to be reformed in line with the concern for overall architectural coherence, for institutional roles and responsibilities to be clarified and streamlined, and for ineffectual institutions to be discarded.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, others insist that

compartmentalisation per se is not a problem, but concede that existing institutions have suffered from rapid enlargements in membership and agenda and as such have not been as effective as initially hoped. They thereby argue for reclaiming the APEC mandate as an economic forum focused primarily on trade liberalisation and investment – by implication, keeping security issues within the ARF – and strengthening those institutions as problem-solving or 'action-oriented' mechanisms rather than just talking shops. Significantly, it is the leaders of ASEAN countries, as much as anyone else, who are making such appeals today.<sup>15</sup>

### Regionalism-Elite

A second broad limitation has to do with the elitism inherent in the Asia-Pacific's exclusively intergovernmental brand of regionalism, which has essentially precluded the inclusion of principles pivotal to European regionalism (such as subsidiarity, proportionality, pooled sovereignty, distribution of competences, delegation of powers and enfranchisement of non-state actors).<sup>16</sup> Regarding ASEAN-centric institutions, the ASEAN Secretariat is not only the bureaucracy of ASEAN, but also provides administrative support for the ARF, the ASEAN+3 and the EAS (albeit with little delegation and rather meagre resources). To an extent, Asia-Pacific governments have sought to accommodate the region's embryonic participatory regionalism, as demonstrated by the existence of parallel summits comprising civil society organisations and the proliferation of semi-official dialogues such as the Shangri-La Dialogue and 'second-track' fora. Arguably, these accommodations have rendered Asia-Pacific regionalism somewhat less exclusive than before but 'regionalism-elite' rather than 'regionalism-égalité' remains its distinguishing feature.

Asia-Pacific regionalism is also elitist in a different sense. As noted, the inordinate influence enjoyed by ASEAN in the region's institutions has occasionally led to the marginalisation of non-ASEAN member countries.<sup>17</sup> Of course, major powers can and do influence the institutions' agendas; China's dominance of the ASEAN+3 is a good example. Yet

there is a palpable sense of frustration among regional stakeholders over the content and pace of regional co-operation as dictated by ASEAN. The Australian and Japanese regional visions discussed earlier hint at a shared irritation with the Association, whose centrality, so far as those proposals are concerned, should no longer be assumed. In their view, no regional architecture is possible without first establishing regional order, which can only be underwritten by a concert or coalition of the region's great and middle powers. But whether America and China – which the late Richard Holbrooke described as 'the most important bilateral relationship in the world today'<sup>18</sup> – can co-operate in a multilateral setting on a range of pressing strategic concerns, or whether China and Japan are ready for their own version of the Élysée Treaty, remains a difficult question.

### Regionalism-Polite

A third limitation has to do with the default diplomatic and security model employed in Asia-Pacific regionalism.<sup>19</sup> Much has been made about the 'ASEAN Way' and its contribution to Asia-Pacific security. A governing principle and security culture rolled into one, the ASEAN Way – which privileges consultation, flexible consensus, informality, institutional minimalism, co-operative security and non-interference<sup>20</sup> – ostensibly forms the basis of regional relations among member countries of ASEAN-led institutions (primarily through their commitment to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation). In the case of ASEAN, emerging conventions that came to define the ASEAN Way proved significant to securing post-Sukarno Indonesia's long-term commitment to peaceful relations with other ASEAN members and, in turn, their acknowledgement of Indonesia's place and stake in Southeast Asia.

It is this logic that partly accounts for the endorsement of the ASEAN Way by the ARF as the appropriate diplomatic strategy for engaging China and encouraging its evolution from revolutionary regime to 'responsible' power and stakeholder.<sup>21</sup> While newer institutions such as the ASEAN+3 and the EAS do not claim (not publicly at

least) the ASEAN Way as their diplomatic model, their status as ASEAN-centric arrangements effectively ensures that ASEAN's way of doing business – no different really than how the world of sovereign states conducts its affairs, according to a former secretary general of ASEAN<sup>22</sup> – is equally the *modus operandi* of regionalism in the Asia-Pacific in general. Indeed, the future inclusion of Russia and the United States in the membership of the EAS gives greater grist to the belaboured adage that 'comfort levels' of all participants in regional institutions have to be established before more advanced forms of regional co-operation can be entertained.

### *Conservation not Innovation*

Notwithstanding its pervasive influence in the region, the ASEAN Way is limited as a regional mechanism for conflict prevention. A diplomatic convention that makes few if any demands on membership commitments, displays no precise and binding obligations, privileges consensus rather than decisiveness, and favours non-interference is, in the view of its critics, purely about process and not concrete outcomes.<sup>23</sup> Its deferential nature also inadvertently dissuades and downplays dissent. A 'regionalism-polite' that achieves little by way of substance, the ASEAN Way, it is argued, does not deserve the endorsement accorded it by ASEAN's backers. No matter the extent of regional aspiration expressed in the seminal documents and evolutionary plans of action common in Asia-Pacific regionalisms, concrete institutional progress is not what those regionalisms are designed to achieve because ASEAN-led regional initiatives are all about maintaining ASEAN's pride of place and little else – a conflation of means and end, as it were. Rather, the ASEAN Way is seen by its detractors as a key reason behind the yawning gap between upbeat institutional visions and harsh regional realities: essentially, it preserves rather than revises the regional status quo. Or, as the late Michael Leifer once put it, ASEAN – and, by extension, its complex of region-wide institutions – is all about conservation, not innovation.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, unlike the relative congruence in size, power and influence

among members of the European Union, atypical disparities in power and influence exist among ASEAN members, which have contributed indirectly to the Association's inability to act decisively when needed. On the one hand, Indonesia, the largest country in Southeast Asia and political epicentre of ASEAN, has long been one of the economically weakest ASEAN members. On the other the smallest (in land size) of the ASEAN countries, Singapore, is the wealthiest in per capita income terms, enjoying inordinate influence on the world diplomatic stage. In light of such structural discrepancies, it is remarkable that ASEAN has succeeded as far as it has. That it has can arguably be attributed to regionalism-politeness, where ASEAN members, despite those discrepancies, have nonetheless long acknowledged Indonesia as *primus inter pares* in the ASEAN 'hierarchy' and, in the case of intra-ASEAN economic integration, made the requisite historical concessions regarding the pace and extent of co-operation in order to accommodate Indonesia's state of development.

Even then, analysts generally supportive of the ASEAN Way have also argued for the need for the model to evolve to satisfy the demands of an increasingly transnational Asia-Pacific, where the logics of state sovereignty and non-interference may no longer be universally applicable.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, ASEAN's establishment of a legal charter in November 2007 has led some to surmise that the ASEAN Way itself will gradually change, while others have conversely noted that it is in fact the very diplomatic model, once informal and flexible, that has now been legalised and entrenched. Either way, the prospect of enhanced legalisation and the emerging consensus among Asia-Pacific governments for more practical regional co-operation could mean a more demanding form of regionalism in the future, with a revised diplomatic convention-cum-security model to boot.

### **Whither Asia-Pacific Regionalism?**

Considerably more is required of Asia-Pacific regionalism today than ever before. Few, not least ASEAN countries

themselves, dispute the notion that existing regional institutions can no longer remain as they are and still service the region's growing catalogue of challenges in any consequential way. The alternative visions of Asia-Pacific order and architecture reviewed above reflect an increasing willingness among other stakeholders to question ASEAN's default centrality in Asia-Pacific regionalism. The ardent regional debate sparked by the Rudd proposal was particularly revealing as it suggested that ASEAN is not inevitably opposed to new formulations, so long as it is consulted in the process and, more importantly, retains a key role and place in any revised architecture. To be sure, not everyone supports the idea of sidelining the Association; for different reasons, the big powers – China especially, the United States less so – did not fully endorse the Australian and Japanese proposals. That being said, ASEAN can ill afford to be content that it has successfully staved off another prospective no-confidence motion. If anything, failure to overcome the limitations discussed above could lead to the Association's undoing. There are some encouraging signs, not least the collective realisation in the face of grim region-wide crises such as natural disasters and financial meltdown that regional integration must be taken seriously, or the occasional indications that regional governments are not averse to contravening the ASEAN Way if the convention impedes co-operation. The stakes for ASEAN are high: either stay relevant, or risk being outgrown by the very regional architecture it has nurtured. ■

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## Notes

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- 20 Amitav Acharya, 'Ideas, Identity, and Institution-building: From the "ASEAN Way" to the "Asia-Pacific Way"?'', *Pacific Review* (Vol. 10, No. 3, 1997), pp. 319–46. In fact, the ASEAN Way was already being fêted as early as 1989; see Michael Haas, *The Asian Way to Peace: A Story of Regional Cooperation* (New York: Praeger, 1989).
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