The Aspirations of ASEAN in the Political and Cultural Context : Constraints and Potential (*Yeo Lay Hwee and Andrew Hurrell*)

Executive Summary

History and context are crucial to understanding the constraints and potential of region-building. ASEAN's move towards more coordination and greater integration emerged in stages, shaped by a variety of endogenous and exogenous forces. Hence this paper began by looking chronologically at ASEAN's development and teasing out the narratives that accompanied the different stages of its development.

ASEAN began as a project to promote confidence building amongst its founding members and at the same time for them to band together to present a united front against potential external interference from outside powers. Security concern was the major driver towards loose and informal cooperation amongst its members.

The progress of ASEAN in its formative years was very slow, occasionally marred by residual disputes fuelled by continued mistrust amongst the members. However, major political developments in the region and internationally such as the accelerated withdrawal of British forces east of Suez, Nixon's Guam doctrine in 1969 in the face of setbacks in Vietnam, with security implications for the region kept the members together. The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia (then Kampuchea) in 1978 led to a more concerted effort by the ASEAN members to work together and coordinate their positions in international forums leading to the emergence of ASEAN as a diplomatic community.

The Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia and the end of the Cold war challenged ASEAN to embark on a more ambitious agenda to promote the ASEAN way as the modus operandi for managing security relations in the broader Asia-Pacific. The ASEAN way is built on the distinctive approach of quiet diplomacy conducted through informal mechanisms with emphasis on consultation and consensus.

The Asian Financial Crisis that hit Southeast Asia in 1997 brought serious challenges to ASEAN and its ASEAN way. The loss of economic competitiveness to other emerging markets, in particular China, and the need to revitalise its economic fortunes and strengthen coordination in response to globalisation led to calls towards deeper economic integration. The rise of China and its increasing presence in the Asia-Pacific led to complex issues and linkages between economic and security regionalism. The formal separation of the two spheres cannot hide the extent to which political bargaining is structured by the relationship between trade and economic agenda on the one hand and the looming uncertainties in the security sphere. This in turn drove ASEAN to move

progressively away from loose inter-governmental cooperation towards on the one hand, far more explicit security activism in the form of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus 8 (ADMM Plus) and the East Asia Summit, and greater emphasis in strengthening economic coordination in creating an ASEAN Economic Community.

Looking at ASEAN's development thus far, a few critical issues are important in trying to understand the potential and constraints with regards to ASEAN's aspirations and future trajectory. To extrapolate whether ASEAN will move towards greater institutionalisation and formal legal framework for cooperation, we need to critically examine the nature of the states in Southeast Asia and the role of regional cultural distinctiveness.

Comparative writing on regionalism has followed mainstream International Relations studies in failing to appreciate the wide range of entities which are placed under the heading of the state, and the way in which the process of state formation in different regions of the world produced different kinds of regional international societies. Many states in Southeast Asia bear rather little resemblance to the western Weberian idealisations, often with rather important repercussions for regional politics and region-building. Equally the history of regional state formation has produced regional international societies which may have elective affinities with the allegedly universal Westphalian original but which also have important distinctive features – not necessarily because of cultural differences but because of radically different historical trajectories, patterns of regional interaction and geopolitical and economic contexts.

One dimension of this variation is cultural. Rather than what is universal or general, regional distinctiveness becomes part of the explanatory picture. Culture, understood as the lasting legacy of attitudes and beliefs in society derived from authoritative teachings and recurrent, large scale socialisation processes and embedded in complex and elaborate systems of discourse, informed the way critical concepts and ideas such as sovereignty, non-intervention are interpreted, understood and internalised.

Clearly the character of the state in the ASEAN region has been crucial in determining the narratives of ASEAN's formation and development. The centrality of sovereignty, of nation-building, of top-down authoritarian or state-guided economic development impact the way regional community building is conceived. The relative state weakness and imperatives of development where nation-state is seen as solution contrast with post-1945 Europe in which nation-state and nationalism is seen to be a problem to be overcome.

The possibility of future change in ASEAN could therefore come from the changes in the character of the states in Southeast Asia. As the states transformed themselves and moved away from an authoritarian nature to a more democratic form, and as states gained legitimacy to become stronger, would

regionalism in Southeast Asia take a different trajectory? We have started to witness a shift from state-centric narratives of regionalism to a more people-centred narrative embodying discourses in democracy and human rights. This is due in part due to the democratic transition of Indonesia and other member states, the general broad trends in the diffusion of power with more active engagement of civil society actors, and ASEAN's desire for international legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of its key dialogue partners.

Civil society organisations and non-state actors have also become more involved in the ASEAN processes, in particular with the ASEAN Inter-governmental Commission on Human Rights, bringing the question if and when an alternative narrative of ASEAN regionalism would emerge to shape the future of ASEAN?

Besides these internal drivers of change, ASEAN will continue to react and respond to extra-regional forces. The political constraints in ASEAN's future development are strongly shaped by forces such as the rise of China and the role of great power dynamics. ASEAN has over the decades developed norms such as non-interference, respect for diversity, the centrality of peace, and cooperative security to engage bigger powers in its region. As the region moves from being a subordinate security region to become a core world region where the interests of US and China may collide, would ASEAN be able to continue to apply these norms to influence and engage the bigger powers? Would the big powers continue to adhere to these norms so that the potentially very rough edges of big power dynamics can be softened? Can ASEAN move from a passive player to more active power-broker between China and the US with its current institutional structure or does it even aspire to be one? If ASEAN wants to become a more proactive player in shaping the regional order, what needs to be done, and what are the challenges that need to be overcome? Are these challenges cultural or political?

Closely related to the issue of the rise of China and the continued reliance on the US to provide the security umbrella in Asia is the dilemma that ASEAN faces in the tensions between economic and security regionalism. Economically, China is now ASEAN's most important trading partner, and for several ASEAN member states, China is also an increasingly important investor. However, in the security arena, with the tensions in the South China Sea, many ASEAN member states still look towards the US for security guarantee. Strategic mistrust of China has not been fully overcome by the increasing economic interdependence. If this strategic mistrust persist or deepen would it then not lead to a "retreat" in economic engagement? How ASEAN could manage this tension between security and economic regionalism in turn depends on the developments of the bilateral ties between China and the US, something that ASEAN may not have much leverage beyond trying to offer a forum where the major powers could meet to work out the great power bargain.

Beyond this most critical question on the state of Sino-US relations and its impact on ASEAN's future development, there are also many other global trends that might have a bearing on the future trajectory of regionalism in Southeast Asia. These include the growing nationalism and the rising inequalities both within and between states that are not conducive towards greater regional integration. The greater diffusion of power while empowering individuals and non-state actors will make it harder to attain a broad consensus. The state-led or elite-led regional integration within ASEAN will be increasingly contested, and what would emerge out of this contestation is uncertain. A possible scenario would be towards non-institutionalised trans-regionalism with a proliferation of informal networks of actors.

In conclusion, the narratives on ASEAN has evolved and changed in response to dominant exogenous forces. In recent decades, endogenous factors such as the democratisation and liberalisation of several ASEAN member states, the role of Indonesia has also served as drivers of change. Unlike the dominant historical narrative of regional integration as a peace project in Europe, there was no dominant narrative on ASEAN that could really serve as driver for integration. Yet the commitment to the idea of ASEAN has remained relatively strong and this in itself offers the opportunity for policy makers to imagine a more effective ASEAN.