CHAPTER 3

Building the New East Asia

Bunn Nagara

The Context

Asia is the most extensive continent in the world in terms of geographical area, civilisational history, cultural variety, population size and number of constituent countries. It is, naturally, also the most diverse continent in environmental, climatological and sociocultural terms. From Himalayan mountain ranges and the Gobi desert to equatorial rainforests and south-east Asian archipelagos, all the world's major religions and nearly all its early civilisations originated in Asia. Natural factors like location, climate, terrain and vegetation impact on human habitation. Sociocultural factors like language, dress, diet, belief system, politics as well as custom and tradition in turn shape society today and tomorrow.

Owing to its diversity and expanse, Asia is conceived as comprising four regions: West Asia, Central Asia, South Asia and East Asia. Because East Asia covers the largest expanse from north to south, it comprises north-east Asia and south-east Asia. This is the "rice belt" of the world, where rice as a crop is not only grown and traded but also consumed as a daily staple, the main cereal in every meal. There is evidence to suggest that east Asia had long been conceived as a sociocultural whole, in some ways unique in itself and also distinct from other regions, whether elsewhere in Asia or beyond.

Until the mid-19th century, Western literature had referred to West, Central and parts of South Asia collectively as "the Orient," meaning that part of the globe where the sun rises (Latin: *oriens*, "risen or rising"). From the late 19th century, as Europeans became more familiar with these regions, the term also covered East Asia. In the 20th century "Orient" and "Oriental" largely applied to the places and peoples of East Asia. It was still a loose term with little definitive bearing on nationality, since Western populations remained relatively unfamiliar with East Asia. And so "the Orient" in effect became a catch-all phrase to mean that region which lies between the Pacific Ocean in the east, the Indian sub-continent (South Asia) in the west, and the South Pacific islands in the south.

But for the peoples of East Asia, "Orient" and "Orientals" seemed somewhat crude and demeaning terms. (This is particularly so among Asian Americans in the United States today.) East Asian peoples were, and are, not vague about themselves or to

one another as different ethnicities and nationalities. Their lands and seas had long been well-charted before the arrival of European explorers. They were and are proud of the facts that their cultures and societies were among the earliest, their public administrations among the most accomplished, and their pharmacology, astronomy, navigation and technology were once among the most refined and sophisticated in human history.

As elsewhere, climate was the key factor to shape East Asian cultures and societies. It determined vegetation and crops, and therefore also staples, livestock, cash crops and farming implements. It also determined diets, dress, festivals, various other customs and traditions, belief systems and early modes of travel. In the early Malay states for example, the annual monsoon winds regularly brought traders from north-east Asia, South Asia and West Asia.[1] Modern traders may no longer rely on wind power to sail today, but the sociocultural norms that have been established remain to this day.

The natural geographical attributes in south-east Asia clearly determined the societal make-up of countries in the region today. The Malay peninsula was in the middle of maritime trade routes through the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca. Culture spread alongside trade: Buddhism spread to ancient Sri Vijaya, Hinduism to Majapahit and Islam to Malacca. European colonial authorities later introduced Christianity. In the Malay peninsula, a multi-ethnic society was being formed when traders and others from afar settled, before the British inducted large numbers of labourers from India to work the rubber plantations and railways, and from China to work the tin mines, adding another layer of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism to the mix.

A result is that Malaysians, in both West and East Malaysia, are in some details unlike those of the same formal ethnicity in their forefathers' original home countries – and precisely in those areas that distinguish between different cultures making them distinctive: diet, dress, social predispositions and even the character of some festivals. In today's Malaysia, ethnic Malays are not identical to other (proto-)Malays in the region, being more mixed deutero-Malays typical of coastal communities and more heterogeneous than elsewhere; ethnic Chinese are not identical to Chinese in China; and ethnic Indians similarly form a community identity distinct from those in South Asia, even where blood relations exist. They are all Malaysians together.

[1] Sila Tripati and L.N. Raut, 'Monsoon wind and maritime trade: a case study of historical evidence from Orissa, India,' *Current Science*, Vol. 90, No. 6, March 2006; William Gervase Clarence-Smith, 'Middle Eastern entrepreneurs in Southeast Asia, c1750-c1940,' SOAS, University of London, 2002

A Modern and Modernising East Asia

Among the principal features common to East Asian cultures is the practice of voluntary mutual assistance, or self-help of the region within and unto itself. It may be relatively more pronounced in some parts of the region than in others, or at some points in time than at others, but it is a practice that remains endemic in the region. In south-east Asia, nationalists fighting Western colonialism helped one another across national borders as if any national differences that existed did not matter. And locally, within agrarian Malay and Kadazan (northern Borneo) cultures for example, the principle of *gotong-royong* or working together in the village for the common good has long been an important guiding principle, whether at harvest time or whenever the collective interest is threatened or compromised.

The problem however is not that the principle of common interest is lost today, but that it is continually stretched and tested by the demands of modern industrialism, mass marketisation and rapid urbanisation which tend to prioritise the individual over the collective, the personal over the social, and the monetary-contractual over mutual assistance.[2] Nonetheless, Malaysia has proposed a "prosper thy neighbour" policy of helping enrich neighbouring countries in the region, originally to help uplift the new members of ASEAN in mainland south-east Asia. As former prime minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad explained it, this is essentially a policy of enlightened self-interest for the larger regional interest, to narrow wealth gaps and minimise ill-feeling between neighbouring countries, while also helping to empower poorer countries to be viable markets for one's exports.

This would not only facilitate better cooperation in development programmes, but also stem the flow of illegal migrants or economic refugees from the poorer countries. The fact that this policy was warmly adopted by Singapore and readily welcomed by the other ASEAN countries demonstrates south-east Asia's natural amenability to regional self-help. Besides the ideas, sentiment and slogans, there are practical examples of such concepts in the form of sub-regional projects involving adjacent portions of three or more neighbouring countries in ASEAN.[3]

In 1989, Singapore proposed a southern growth triangle involving Singapore, Johor state in Malaysia and Batam island in Indonesia's Riau province in a project called Sijori (SIngapore-JOhor-RIau), or IMS-GT (Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle). In 1991, Malaysia proposed a similar scheme for Indonesia, Malaysia

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[2] See, for example, Stephen DeMeulenaere, 'Strengthening Indonesia's Traditional Social Reciprocating System, Gotong Royong, Using a Simple Time-Based Accounting System,' unpublished, 2001

[3] Myo Thant, Min Tang and Hiroshi Kakazu (eds), 'Growth Triangles in Asia: A New Approach To Regional Economic Cooperation,' Oxford, 1998

and Thailand in the IMT-GT, or Northern Growth Triangle. The following year, then Philippine president Fidel Ramos found that southern Philippines could also benefit from participating in a similar project, so he campaigned for the four-country BIMP-EAGA (East ASEAN Growth Area) involving Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines (BIMP). As concept and individual projects, regional self-help within south-east Asia has an established base in popular social acceptability, needing only more resource investment and policy commitment to go further.

When the East Asian crisis struck in 1997, not all countries were affected – or at least not all were affected equally. Nonetheless, all countries in East Asia felt that much more cooperation through institutional arrangements should have been in place, either to anticipate and avert the crisis or to reduce its impact. However the East Asia Economic Grouping proposed by Malaysia in 1990 was not in place, and neither was its revised form of the East Asia Economic Caucus. APEC did little or nothing to help in preventing or mitigating the crisis, or in assisting stricken countries to recover.

By 1998, Japan offered an appreciative south-east Asia a US$30 billion aid package called the New Miyazawa Initiative. After the crisis, there was also much more support for ASEAN Plus Three (APT), an (East) Asian Monetary Fund (AMF) and East Asian policy issues.[4] There was also the realisation that APEC was not able to help member countries in need of help. There continues to be regional confidence in East Asia's ability to help itself through closer cooperation among the different countries comprising the region, but not if the regional institution in question is over-extended to cover neighbouring regions with their own problems and priorities.

What is East Asia today, what should it be, and how should it go about being that? National policies are made by governments, but government leaders and officials change over time. Responsible policies that are enduring which help maintain the nation's legitimate interests tend to be rooted in a country's history, experience, psyche and sociocultural matrix. For East Asia, these national policies capture the region's imagination and represent the region's wider interests. Such policies cannot be too narrow as to be nationalistic and therefore parochial, or too broad as to be thinly universal or global, and therefore indistinct. Nor can they be compared easily with those of other regions like central Europe.[5]

[4] 'Govt to propose creation of East Asian community,' *Yomiuri Shimbun* / *Daily Yomiuri*, 17 November 2003; Mohd Arshi Daud, 'Japan to help develop EAS into a framework for regional development,' Bernama, 10 December 2005

[5] Raimo Vayrynen, 'Post-Hegemonic and Post-Socialist Regionalism: A Comparison of East Asia and Central Europe,' Occasional Paper # 13: OP: 3, Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame, August 1997

Examples of such useful policies[6] would be the decision to establish an AMF, and East Asia Free Trade Agreement (EAFTA), a network of bilateral currency swaps and a common regional currency for intra-regional trade. They would have the effect of protecting national interests while advancing East Asian regional interests, in turn facilitating the development of key common national interests. To be more successful however, these policies would tend to derive from the common sociocultural attributes of East Asian nationals.

An AMF or a regional currency would obviously work to the benefit of East Asia. It cannot serve all of Asia, because the coverage would be too broad and the demands and differences too great. At the same time, East Asia cannot depend on existing multilateral institutions like the International Monetary Fund to serve the region's interests exclusively or even primarily.[7]

In the 1980s, Malaysia adopted a "Look East" policy to emulate the work ethic and productivity of Japan and South Korea. Singapore had also embarked on a similar policy. One result had been the establishment of many Japanese and South Korean enterprises in south-east Asia, providing more jobs, producing more manufactured exports, and in turn leading to rapid growth. The original five countries of ASEAN grew and thrived, and from the 1990s this also occurred with the new ASEAN member countries like Vietnam and Cambodia.

Through the smaller, more compact 13-member APT, an East Asia Community (EAC) would be a regional project that facilitates much more of such productive cooperation and policy harmonisation within East Asia. China, Japan and South Korea have already agreed that ASEAN should drive the EAC, since ASEAN's long-established neutrality and esteem are well accepted by them. This allows the region to transcend any bilateral difficulties between China and Japan or between South Korea and Japan, with the prospect of fast-tracking various development plans in the East Asian ambit. Through this APT advantage, mutual confidence-building would develop further for better social, diplomatic, political and other relations to strengthen the overall regional relationship. With perhaps some lessons learned from ASEAN's own experience, a collective sense of a closer regional community could also begin to grow.

Economic harmonisation and integration among East Asian countries have been proceeding on their own, but almost unwittingly on an ad hoc basis. An EAC would smoothen and quicken the process by building on the commonalities shared by East Asian nations, and creating more bonding opportunities while minimising discord along

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[6] See, for example, Ali Alatas, '"ASEAN Plus Three" Equals Peace Plus Prosperity,' 2001 Regional Outlook Forum, Institute of South-East Asian Studies, Singapore, January 2001, by the former Foreign Minister of Indonesia

[7] Peter Montagnon, 'Disillusion leads to growing spirit of cooperation among Asian nations,' *Financial Times*, 21 July 2000

the way. An EAC would not therefore be something completely new, but a policy investment of the region set within the context of APEC and the 16-member East Asia Summit (EAS) with Australia, New Zealand and India, to improve current practices for the benefit of all countries in the region.

Among the sociocultural commonalities shared in East Asia are a strong government-industry link in the form of business-friendly policies, political stability to ensure policy consistency, non-disruptive industrial relations to encourage growth, and investing in the people through an emphasis on education and training.[8] From such a common sociocultural orientation, specific programmes that are conducive to policy harmonisation would also be facilitated. The economies of East Asia today are so destined for fuller integration that an economic crisis or political disruption originating somewhere within it can spread quickly to other parts of the region. For better confidence and economic security, it is necessary to avoid or minimise such crises through institutional arrangements like an EAC for improving policy understanding, cooperation, coordination, harmonisation, management and oversight.

An EAC would do more than any other existing forum or organisation. It would enhance dialogue among policymakers and business interests as well as professional associations, voluntary organisations, public interest groups and cultural bodies of the countries of East Asia. It would be a comprehensive, multi-sectoral entity that encourages higher levels of social understanding, political cooperation and economic integration simultaneously.

East Asia is generally conceived of as comprising four primary geopolitical components, particularly in economic and diplomatic terms: ASEAN, Japan, China and Korea. (The reunification of the two Koreas is envisaged over the medium to long terms.) Each of these components would play a constructive role by contributing its share to the larger regional interests of East Asia. They have already done well so far; an East Asian Community would help to ensure they continue to do so with more positive opportunities and fewer possible disruptions.

Among these four components of East Asia, the impressive growth of China's economy presents many opportunities for the rest of the region, particularly in regard to trade and investment.[9] By working more closely together within an EAC, the opportunities for diplomatic cooperation would also grow, helping to develop additional opportunities for commerce and cultural exchanges in further improving relations. The challenge that China now poses to south-east Asia by diverting foreign investment towards itself will soon subside as its comparative advantages like lower wages level off

[8] Wendy Dobson, 'East Asian Integration: Synergies Between Firm Strategies and Government Policies,' *Multinationals and East Asian Integration*, Wendy Dobson and Chia Siow Yue (eds), International Development Research Centre, Canada and ISEAS, Singapore, 1997

[9] Shinichi Ichimura, *Political Economy of Japanese and Asian Development*, Springer-Verlag, 1998

to a (higher) "plateau." This would be replaced in due course with "the real China market," comprising many more customers with enhanced purchasing power, buying higher volumes of goods and services from East Asia and the rest of the world.

The United States is a large and distinctive market on its own, as well as an important partner for East Asia and other regions. It would and should continue to play such a valuable role. Owing to market diversity and technological differentials, it is unlikely for the United States and China to compete head-to-head as rival production centres to sell to the world. Instead, the future is likely to be more of the same of the present: US businesses investing in China, with US and Chinese consumers acting as customers for each other's markets. Other markets would complement both of them.

Chinese production centres will continue to grow in size and number, including those that are Chinese-owned, but their output will continue to be outpaced by the purchasing power and effective demand of Chinese consumers. It is a fact of world markets that a country's demand for goods and services is larger and more varied than its own capacity to produce. No reasonably open economy today can produce enough to satisfy its own demand, especially where consumer clout forms a steep curve.

Politically and strategically, politics would follow and support this course of events. The political priorities of the United States, as the world's foremost capitalist economy, would be based on its economic interests. This would also be true of China as it increasingly bases its national interests on market practices and even market priorities. An EAC that has China as a key component would benefit the United States by ensuring greater national policy consistency, foreign policy rationality, and generally market-friendly policies.

This is what US policymakers mean when they talk of encouraging China to be "a responsible stakeholder" in a globalised world. It is interesting and important that Washington has in recent years moved from seeing China as a "strategic competitor" (in 2001), following from the Clinton administration's "strategic partner" concept, to a "responsible stakeholder," or at least seek to move China in that direction.[10] With mutual engagement all round, the stakes are jointly held by all players reciprocally.

The prospects of consolidating this situation and continually improving on it are promising. China has agreed with virtually all of ASEAN's recent proposals, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), APT, a Free Trade Agreement with ASEAN, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation of ASEAN, the EAS and the EAC. Even China's most highly contentious issue with south-east Asia, its claims to the Spratly Islands, have been put on hold with a studied avoidance of provocative action and statements. The only uncompromising position adopted by Beijing concerns Taiwan, but on this issue

[10] Toshihiro Nakayama, 'Politics of US Policy Toward China: Analysis of Domestic Factors,' CNAPS Working Paper Series, The Brookings Institution, September 2006

south-east Asia, like much of the rest of the world, regards it as China's internal affair – and would not interfere in it.

On ASEAN's proposals for regional institutions, China has taken the position that ASEAN should manage the process of establishing them – with "ASEAN in the driving seat" – without Beijing imposing any demand or agenda in their establishment. It has also consistently kept to the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states, reciprocating ASEAN's position. It is a principle readily appreciated within ASEAN. China's neutral approach is also evident at United Nations deliberations, where it has typically abided by international norms and conventions. This sense of playing by the rules of the international community coincides with China's "peaceful rise."

It is tempting to assume that China is pursuing or otherwise inducing other countries in the region, such as ASEAN member countries, to accept certain positions or conform to certain conditions. After all, China is rising and "all roads" seem to "lead to Beijing." However, it would be wrong and dangerous to presume this, because no major power – whether established or on the rise – should be encouraged to think that it is in a position to shape regional or world opinion unilaterally, especially when it is not in such a position.

Since 2005 however, it has become evident that China's fiscal generosity has touched several south-west Pacific island nations in terms of foreign assistance and special dispensations. Beijing has been developing diplomatic relations with the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Timor Leste (the former East Timor), Tonga and Vanuatu. The most obvious purposes are the minerals contained in these island nations, and the prospect of outmanoeuvring Taiwan's bid for membership of the United Nations. China's presence in the south-west Pacific follows Taiwan's activism in the region for diplomatic recognition, where the cluster of albeit small sovereign nations could mean a sizeable number of votes at the UN General Assembly. On a bilateral basis, some of these Pacific island nations have recently switched their diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing.

Such timely displays of generosity are not limited to any one country. Also in 2005, Japan itself practised "chequebook diplomacy" in wooing the support of African countries in Tokyo's bid for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. Apart from the cynical manoeuvring and dubious ethics of the issue, what seems most regrettable was that such inducements were seen as necessary, while the merits of Tokyo's case for membership were deemed inadequate to secure support for its campaign.

Elsewhere, particularly in West Asia, Africa and Latin America, China's development of diplomacy can be attributed to its search for the chief resource – oil. A consistent and moderately priced supply of oil is essential for China's industrial and overall economic development. Beijing's overtures to these various regions have also been seen as bidding for prospective constituencies in a looming rivalry with the United

States. However, it is premature or worse to presume this development, since a zero-sum game makes sense only with geostrategic rivalry, but such rivalry has not materialised.

On the contrary, China's recent actions suggest an inclusiveness that engages other countries such as the United States equally. While agreeing to participate in East Asian institutions, China is also a founding member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) with Russia and Central Asian countries (following from the Shanghai Five), at the same time proposing a biannual economic summit with the United States.[11] Because to assume that China is or will be a threat could be a dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy, a more constructive assumption of benign development ("peaceful rise") could equally be made, leading to a more positive self-fulfilling presumption.[12] Increasingly, the evidence is that China rejects a simple either-or approach of "us against them," in favour of an inclusive "everyone, but in separate contexts."[13]

ASEAN in Transition

From the vantage point of ASEAN, Japan needs to heed the wider East Asian regional view in how it chooses to relate to China and South Korea. While neither Beijing nor Seoul sets the tone for ASEAN of relating to Tokyo, how Japan chooses to tend its relations in north-east Asia will either impress or disappoint countries in ASEAN, both individually and collectively. Like China and South Korea, several countries in south-east Asia had suffered under Imperial Japan; and because China had suffered the most, the aloof-yet-dismissive attitude of former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi to his visits to Yasukuni Shrine, for example, is more likely to disappoint – while China's sense of wounded pride is more likely to impress – an ASEAN that has borne painful witness to events in history. How Koizumi's successors replicate or repudiate his approach will help shape the region's future and potential.

ASEAN is sometimes said to be in transition, with change a constant condition for ASEAN no less than for other regional organisations. Firstly, ASEAN had expanded its membership from five to six to all 10 countries in south-east Asia. Next, it had to contend with internal or neighbouring challenges like Myanmar and East Timor (now Timor Leste), and larger ones like APEC and the WTO. Then ASEAN grappled with separate free trade agreements (FTAs) between individual member countries and major powers, prospectively distorting intra-ASEAN arrangements. And then ASEAN

[11] Qin Jize and Wu Jiao, 'China, US set up strategic economic dialogue,' *China Daily*, 21 September 2006

[12] '"China threat" a self-fulfilling prophecy, says Jap official,' *The Straits Times*, 16 January 2006

[13] 'China says Japan ties "top priority" after Abe win,' Reuters, 22 September 2006; 'ASEAN-China linkage grows,' *The Straits Times* (Editorial), 28 October 2006; 'ASEAN-China relations more comprehensive,' Xinhua / *China Daily*, 31 October 2006; 'China willing to have FTA discussion with Japan,' Xinhua, 2 November 2006

proceeded with trade agreements with major powers, while also steering the ARF, APT, the EAS and the EAC, while formulating the ASEAN Charter.

However, not all of these imply or require that ASEAN be transformed qualitatively. Only three of these developments seem to pull ASEAN towards a semblance of change: Myanmar, multiple FTAs by individual member countries with major powers abroad, and the ASEAN Charter. Even so, each of these has relatively little impact on the future prospects of ASEAN in any conceivably negative way.

The Myanmar problem has produced serious repercussions, particularly in ASEAN's dealings with Europe and North America. But the lack of consensus within ASEAN on how to encourage reform in Myanmar, notwithstanding the four objectives in the mission statement of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC)[14] – coupled with a consensus to do something – effectively means that the "Myanmar problem" would pose no serious difficulty for ASEAN unity. The bundle of separate bilateral FTAs between several ASEAN members and major players outside south-east Asia is more worrying in diminishing the unity and policy harmonisation among member states. Even so, the difficulties this causes is limited because ASEAN is about more than just economic cooperation.

The ASEAN Charter has taken decades, but like all other ASEAN-related instruments including ASEAN itself, it has been necessitated by circumstances. It is said to give ASEAN a "legal persona" which it did not have,[15] and in practice aims for greater harmonisation by disciplining errant members if necessary. However, dispute-settling mechanisms would be explored before punitive measures are taken, while penalties exist as a deterrent against misconduct.

On regional security, which is really ASEAN's forte, the organisation has a record of doing well. In the Pacific-wide ARF for example, there is consensus within ASEAN and no obstruction from outside south-east Asia to its stewardship. The complaint is only that the ARF, and therefore ASEAN in particular, should do more and do it more effectively. Generally, ASEAN does better in steering larger regional or meta-regional entities than when individual member nations are enticed by external major powers to join in "X – ASEAN" practices.

Foreign investors have long ceased to be nervous about political instability in ASEAN countries, particularly after Cambodia was stabilised in the 1990s. Occasional coups may still occur in Thailand or the Philippines, but they have a minimal or measured impact on business and society. Myanmar's potential for instability is also limited in force and scale within the region. Although the political situation in Timor

[14] 'Asian Voices: Myanmar's Threat To Regional Security,' ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus, 2006

[15] Steven C.M. Wong, 'Charter can save ASEAN from dustbin of history,' *New Sunday Times*, 17 December 2006

Leste over the medium and long terms are in doubt, the country is neither in ASEAN nor in south-east Asia. Even though it lies close to ASEAN and has applied for membership, serious spillover effects are unlikely even if the country experiences further chaos.

Nor will disputes over island territory and its immediate environs in the South China Sea seriously disrupt ASEAN processes, much less jeopardise ASEAN as an organisation. These disputes have persisted for decades and are likely to persist for more decades – still with neither a definitive conclusion nor a major conflagration. There may be isolated cases of settlement from time to time through international arbitration or adjudication such as decisions handed down by the International Court of Justice, as with the islands of Sipadan and Ligitan between rival claimants Malaysia and Indonesia. But the bulk of disputed offshore territory is likely to remain in dispute, even as activity on most of the territory in question remains in abeyance. A similar or more sanguine situation can be expected in the Philippine claim to the Malaysian state of Sabah.[16]

Nonetheless, analysts will continue to cite disputed islands like the Spratlys as among the chief flashpoints in south-east Asia. However, that would be more because the rest of the region is relatively so tranquil. The lingering disputes, with no major risk of serious conflict, would still exert a negative impact in mostly unseen ways – such as constituting an obstacle to a joint ASEAN military force for purposes like search-and-rescue, anti-piracy, anti-smuggling, counter-terrorism and general (maritime) police work. Such tasks will need to be performed by the national law enforcement bodies, coast guard or emergency teams of the respective countries, such as Malaysia's Maritime Enforcement Agency,[17] in coordination with their counterparts in the neighbouring countries.

Through all this, ASEAN has contributed immensely to a workable partnership among neighbouring countries whose niggling territorial disputes remain. Yet ASEAN was never meant to resolve any of these disputes conclusively, let alone all of them comprehensively, but to help manage them agreeably. ASEAN was also never meant to resolve outstanding problems like 1980s Cambodia, 1990s East Timor, recent turbulence in Aceh or today's Myanmar – only to avoid or minimise any spillage of the discontent and malcontents across national borders.

ASEAN is first and foremost an organisation of national political elites in the regional neighbourhood, committed to preserving the status quo in the name of security, peace, stability and cooperation. This is why ASEAN was never a challenge to Khmer

[16] As former Malaysian prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad explained, although the Philippine president and cabinet might have effectively abandoned the claim, the position of the Philippine congress is another matter.

[17] Bunn Nagara, 'Maritime Security in Southeast Asia: A Malaysian Perspective,' Second General Conference, Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific, Jakarta, unpublished, December 2005

Rouge Cambodia, Indonesia-ravaged East Timor, or military-ruled Myanmar. Although in recent years ASEAN has opened its ears if not also its doors to non-state actors like regional business leaders, academics, policy researchers and public interest groups – who are also part of the regional elite – the core of ASEAN remains member states united for the status quo.

Given these narrow parameters, the levers that ASEAN can pull to effect any desired outcome remains very limited. Whether it is the continuing debacle in Myanmar or the annual haze from atmospheric pollution largely from Indonesia's Sumatra and Kalimantan, the options for effective action are few or elusive. When presiding over matters outside south-east Asia, such as in north-east Asia or the wider Asia-Pacific, the best that ASEAN can do is to muster its moral authority because that is where ASEAN is at its most united and articulate.

However, moral authority tends to be seen as expendable, particularly when more immediate concerns like political expediencies are at stake. So when Myanmar for example regards its political expediencies to be at issue, its perceived waywardness becomes a problem for ASEAN. The unity and moral authority of ASEAN are diminished in the wider world, and with such prestige goes some of ASEAN's international credibility. Nonetheless, whether or not Myanmar's situation is seen as its own internal matter, ASEAN's plight as a consequence of it is generally seen as an internal ASEAN matter – but one on which parties outside ASEAN feel free to take positions of their choice.

Despite appearances, the single biggest factor in ASEAN's evolution might well be Myanmar. As an issue, Myanmar may even have triggered or at least hastened the establishment of the ASEAN Charter. ASEAN in the 21st century has shown it would no longer accept a member's unfulfilled pledge of democratisation after well into its second decade (after the 1990 election). International ostracism of Myanmar's government, and by association the international implications for ASEAN itself, is unlikely to be welcomed by the other nine member governments of ASEAN.

By around the turn of the century, some years after Myanmar's failure to honour its reform pledge, leaders of the original five ASEAN countries found they no longer needed to continue with apologetics for Myanmar's lack of reforms. Like the annual haze problem, the by-now perennial Myanmar problem may see ASEAN leaders sitting down and jointly working out a solution – with or without the active concurrence of Myanmar. Operationally, this may be possible with ASEAN's established "10 – X" formula, with much of the rest being interpretation and presentation.

As a result of this sense of change in the ASEAN mood as occasioned by Myanmar, much international speculation has focused on the prospect of ASEAN abandoning its principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of member states. That is unlikely to happen dramatically for a number of reasons:

- First, non-intervention is a universal principle present in and observed by various international agreements, including the Bandung declaration, the Non-Aligned Movement charter and indeed standard United Nations practice.[18]

- Second, non-intervention lies at the heart of ASEAN cohesiveness; if that principle were jettisoned, it could mean the withering away of ASEAN – old members may feel exceedingly anxious, new members may feel uneasy or suspicious, while everyone else would be tempted to intervene in others' affairs for their own interests – even on the subject of disputed territory.

- Third, where the problem has been seen as deriving from the non-intervention principle, it has not been so; ASEAN does intervene, if only selectively, and without acknowledging it as intervention.

A sense of policy realism would suggest that such useful "non-intervening intervention" would continue. Where some intervention is seen as important and necessary, it would be done appropriately; yet it would not do to concede it as interventionist because that would be quite out of the ASEAN character. That, at least, has been the established, unofficial de facto position of ASEAN.

What Myanmar may effect is a change in that position, by ASEAN either abandoning the non-intervention principle or redefining a degree of intervention, through consensus, as hands-on policy activism as a contingency measure. That is the substance of considerable soul-searching by ASEAN lawmakers at, for example, the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Caucus on Myanmar (and the broader Inter-Parliamentary Union) in Manila in April 2005. The latter course of redefinition is more likely. Still, events in Myanmar in 2005 did not progress visibly beyond those in 2004, when the AIPMC was formed.[19]

ASEAN's Troika system of pressing certain member states on action or reforms deemed necessary is strictly an interventionist contingency measure that has not been perceived as intervention. Another action that was interventionist but not seen to be so was Singapore's move on 11 October 2006 to host urgent multi-nation talks on 13 October on the haze problem originating in Indonesia, which prompted Indonesia to insist on hosting them instead on 14 October. If Singapore had not initiated the talks, Indonesia might not have hosted them; by initiating them, Singapore prodded Indonesia into a necessary course of action.

[18] Ali Alatas, op. cit., during the discussion session
[19] 'Asian Voices: Myanmar's Threat To Regional Security,' op. cit., Zaid Ibrahim, Foreword

In ASEAN's stand on Myanmar, the main motivating factor for a measured change is not democratisation or even international pressure on ASEAN to pressure Myanmar, but the prospect of a fissure in ASEAN ranks between the democratic original five members and the rest. After the end of Suharto's rule in Indonesia in 1998, all original five ASEAN members practise varying degrees of democratic governance. Brunei's membership in 1984 had introduced the first patently non-democratic state into the ASEAN fold, followed in the 1990s by Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar which then had yet to establish their democratic credentials. Among these newer members, Cambodia today has the closest thing to a functional democracy, despite carping by some critics and opposition parties.

The dividing line within ASEAN on Myanmar relates the composition of the AIPMC to the democratic governance of the respective ASEAN countries. The AIPMC consists of caucuses of parliamentarians in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines, with some parliamentarians in Cambodia on an individual (non-caucus) basis. There are no members or representation from Brunei, Laos or Vietnam (or Myanmar).

It is important not to place too much emphasis on the political systems of ASEAN member states in general. Democratic governance or otherwise was never an issue in ASEAN, much less a condition of membership. And it would never be an outstanding issue or precondition. Yet the point is that the newer ASEAN members tend to perceive intra-ASEAN pressure on Myanmar as a matter of democratisation, even if the issue is really fulfilling promised reforms like honouring the results of the 1990 election. The situation is not helped when ASEAN lawmakers repeatedly press Myanmar on the need for it to "democratise."

The implication drawn by the CLMV (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam) countries is that if it (forced democratisation) is happening to Myanmar today, it might happen to them tomorrow. This explains their lack of support for the ASEAN drive to push for reforms in Myanmar. The fault line between the two groups in ASEAN is enough for some ASEAN leaders to consider at least modifying the declared principle of non-intervention, besides occasional denials that ASEAN would forcibly compel Myanmar to change its ways. But apparently this fault line has not yet made these leaders choose their language more carefully and avoid calling their campaign "democratisation" of Myanmar. Reasonable reforms in Myanmar would end outstanding human rights violations, without necessarily making democracy a key and immediate objective, even if subsequent changes do usher in more democratic governance.

Functionally, ASEAN is about instruments of diplomacy and norms of procedure, with such central concepts as "resilience" and "consensus," especially as they help contain and neutralise wayward behaviour by any member nation. These mainstays of ASEAN will remain and continue. However, there may be limited changes in how

ASEAN sees its own actions, particularly where these actions pertain to some domestic issues of individual member states. Of ASEAN's several strengths, probably the greatest is its own sense of survival as a regional organisation – such that when there is any possibility of a breach in ASEAN unity, that prospect is swiftly foreclosed.

ASEAN will remain and continue with its principles, although probably relying on a new set of nuances as the situation demands. Key current phrases like "transparency" will have some effect, at least to a degree and for a time. And ASEAN is fully capable of redefining the taboo of "intervention" and the precept of "non-intervention" in a way as to justify its exigencies and standard practices without jeopardising its future. This relates directly to ASEAN's state of being – and as one veteran senior ASEAN official put it, "ASEAN is a state of mind."[20] ASEAN has the resilience to continue as a necessary regional organisation for south-east Asia, as it continues to evolve.

ASEAN Security Cooperation

Security cooperation within ASEAN had for decades been circumscribed neatly, such that not much needed to be done by ASEAN as a unitary entity. The internal affairs of each member state were to be handled by that country alone, with the cooperation of one or more others where necessary, as there would be no interference or unsolicited action by an external party. This left only those issues in the spaces between adjacent national jurisdictions to be tackled by some "ASEAN presence." This is just as well, since ASEAN precepts would not accept unilateral action even from a well-intentioned neighbour.

For a time, it looked like the limited number of issues under ASEAN security jurisdiction were being reduced further. Thailand's insurgent communists had been co-opted by a 1982 government amnesty. The Communist Party of Malaya renounced its armed struggle in 1989. The Mindanao-Sabah "stomping ground" for some southern Philippine rebel groups also seemed to be drying up with the 1996 peace agreement between the MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front) and the Philippine government. In 1999, Indonesia even invited the return of exiled remnants of the once-persecuted communist party PKI. Residual sentiments remain all-round, but some of the old threats seemed to have faded.

However, very soon the security situation took a turn for the worse. "Non-conventional threats" like terrorist support, illegal migration, people trafficking, contagious diseases, natural disasters, pollution, smuggling and narcotics either emerged

[20] This aspect of ASEAN has been common currency among its first-generation ministerial officials and various commentators.

or grew in intensity. These are typically cross-border problems that require a regional outlook and joint action by the affected ASEAN member states. At the same time, new twists on the old insurgency or terrorist violence theme seemed to emerge: Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia, the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) as an MNLF splinter and then the criminally-inclined Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, and reinvigorated separatist sentiment such as residual elements of PULO's (Pattani United Liberation Organisation) in Thailand's southernmost provinces – after PULO suffered factionalism in 1995 and crippling arrests in 1998.

The growth in these threats has been met by developments in ASEAN security cooperation. The ASEAN response has generally been swift and coordinated as it needs to be. Individual countries like Indonesia have been criticised for specific issues like a slow or uncertain judicial procedure applying to convicted persons, an unorganised approach to tsunami warnings and ineffective or non-existent air pollution control, but ASEAN as a whole has responded as expected.

ASEAN summits and post-ministerial meetings acknowledge the rise in these threats. Although government resources are always limited, they are more than individual criminal syndicates or rebel groups can raise on their own. Nonetheless, the prospect of widening or deepening maritime security cooperation through a single enforcement agency or force for the entire ASEAN region is constrained by lingering territorial disputes at sea.

However, for the larger strategic issues such as those spanning the South China Sea, there are more hopeful signs of resolving outstanding problems through solid agreement in south-east Asia. Notwithstanding some operational differences in outlook, there is a greater commonality of views on ends and means. The current US-Japan security treaty (May 1954 Mutual Defense Assistance Arrangement) is a case in point.

Historically, this treaty derived from the 1951 San Francisco Mutual Security Treaty in the early post-war period, with its complement in Japan's war-renouncing Constitution. And so the treaty is seen as a positive stabilising factor, contributing to peace, stability and prosperity in Japan – and the rest of East Asia. But since change is inevitable, it has begun with US forces in South Korea over operational command – and also in Japan, beginning in localities like Okinawa (closure of Futenma air base).

If change cannot be stopped, it can at least be managed to avoid being disruptive. Over time, the sense of independence and self-assurance of Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) is set to grow. But even if the SDF were to become less dependent on or beholden to US forces in the ultimate defence of Japan, East Asia's security structure might not change if the North-East Asian status quo comprising Japan, China and the Koreas remained.

With no substantive or sustained threat from north of the 38th parallel, and China remaining a regional stabiliser, a militarily independent, non-nuclear Japan need not be

an aggressive Japan. But to get there practicably, Tokyo will need to demonstrate more consistently and convincingly to its neighbours that it has fully atoned for its wartime atrocities, with neither denial of history nor a glorification of empire. This is important as an indicator that the errors and horrors of the past will not be repeated. Whether the SDF moves in a more prudent direction is for Japanese policymakers to decide, within the framework of international law and regional interests.

Although the issue of North Korean nuclear weapons has become more fraught since 2002, it is an example of how an important issue should be seen carefully in perspective and not be politically loaded, exaggerated or aggravated. The facts are that North Korea's missile tests in July 2006 were abject failures, particularly its long-range (also called intermediate-range) Taepodong-2; that its supposed nuclear bomb test on 9 October 2006 was small for a nuclear device and remains doubtful if it was actually nuclear in nature, and if so whether it was successful;[21] and that there is still no indication Pyongyang has the technology to mount a nuclear payload small and destructive enough on a longer-range missile to constitute a real threat to any country beyond the Korean peninsula.

Calm and logical analysis is necessary to avoid aggravating the situation. South Korea has, since 1998, engaged North Korea constructively (Seoul's "Sunshine Policy") while avoiding negative repercussions that could exacerbate outstanding risks. That was why Kim Dae-jung won the 2000 Nobel Peace Prize, and also why even though south-east Asia is concerned over the prospect of nuclear weapons in North Korea, there is no great alarm as displayed by Washington and Tokyo. The absence of any urgent move by ASEAN to protest against North Korea, by ASEAN itself or through the offices of a larger regional body like the ARF, is therefore not a measure of the level of security concern, cooperation or agreement among ASEAN member countries.

It is generally recognised that the United States has a policy of colluding with allies against countries it does not like, such as North Korea, especially where nuclear ambitions are concerned. It is also recognised that Japan, apart from being a US security ally, is mindful of its sullied wartime relations with Koreans. That would help to explain why Japan and the United States are alarmed over the prospect of a North Korean nuclear threat, should it materialise, even before it materialises, more than any other country in the West or in Asia.

As for North Korea, it is also recognised that the Pyongyang of Kim Jong-il tends to react with spite against any unfriendly action towards it. Besides, it is also widely understood that the greatest nuclear-related threat it represents internationally is not a nuclear attack or even the threat of a nuclear attack, but nuclear proliferation. A calm, logical response would then avoid further provoking North Korea to react in spite, or to

[21] 'North Korea test "went wrong," US official says,' CNN news report, 11 October 2006

make it even more desperate for funds as to encourage it to sell whatever nuclear technology it has to other countries or groups. Such a position on Pyongyang is prudence without appeasement, and the fact that ASEAN member countries broadly share it shows a degree of agreement on security matters in North-East Asia as elsewhere.

Rather than the lack of a reaction from ASEAN against Pyongyang indicating a lack of agreement on security in ASEAN, the unique alarm shared by the United States and Japan indicate their commitment to their bilateral security agreement. The bilateral agreement poses no problem for others so long as it does not impinge on the legitimate interests of other countries in the region, or provoke a third country like North Korea to act against the interests of the region.

And as progress in talks in early 2007 have shown, alarm can be unwarranted as North Korea has shown itself to be amenable to negotiations. Given agreeable terms (release of frozen bank funds and other assistance) and an open approach all-round, Pyongyang can be forthcoming and has agreed to end its nuclear development programme. By mid-July 2007, the IAEA confirmed that North Korea had shut down its sole functioning nuclear reactor. A generally inflexible approach that raises temperatures, suspicions and frustrations is virtually guaranteed to fail.

The typical Malaysian perspective of the US-Japan alliance is that over the long term it has helped to stabilise the region by assuring post-war order, removed any need for Japan to re-arm comprehensively, and facilitated the economic development of Japan and by extension the regional neighbourhood. This perspective also accepts certain changes as inevitable, such as an increasingly independent SDF upon the drawdown, whether prospective or perceived, of the US military commitment in the region. It also recognises that such an imminent outcome as a radical departure from present arrangements is unlikely.

Yet given the possibilities at play, a renewed Japan more at ease both with its own past by fully acknowledging it, and with the region of today as a result, will be most welcome as a key player in shaping a modern East Asia. The same applies broadly to China and the Korean peninsula. If any of these key components of East Asia – and ASEAN as well – were perceived as less than independent or authentic, it would not be able to contribute fully to an East Asian Community, nor would it be regarded as a genuine component of the region. Its credibility would be challenged, and as a result so would its capacity.

The US-Japan defence treaty is a military-defence arrangement that need not extend to the diplomatic, political or economic spheres. For decades, Japan has already shown how the treaty does not impinge on its economic initiatives in the region. Tokyo may feel tempted to experiment with greater diplomatic and political independence as it struggles to be a “normal country” in the 21st century, and that should present no

problem if Japan limited itself to other obligations of normalcy.[22] As a renewed China has discovered, a renewed Japan would find that it needs to work more closely with the rest of East Asia as a key component of the region itself.

It is important for each of the four main components of East Asia (ASEAN, China, Japan, Korea) to act concertedly with the others as a region, while remaining independent politically of any major power interest, whether within or outside East Asia. This is a practical precondition of being taken seriously by the other components of the region and the rest of the world. If a regional component were regarded as merely a proxy of some other power interest, it would be better for the rest of the region to deal directly with that power instead. For East Asia as a regional entity to be credible, both to itself and to the rest of the world, each of its key components must be credible – both in and of itself, as well as working productively with the other three key components for greater promise in the region.

The US military presence in East Asia has been established for decades, and so too has popular opposition to it. Such presence in the form of bases has drawn controversy among local populations, and was never meant to remain in perpetuity. Yet the future of US military bases in the region is generally deemed the internal affairs of the host government and the United States itself – so long as that presence does not compromise the territory, security, sovereignty, legitimate rights and interests or free passage of vessels of countries in the region. While US military bases in the Philippines for example was not a problem for the region, the stationing of US Marines in the Straits of Malacca would be. Thus the slogan "places, not bases" – denoting a standing armada following the closure of US military installations at Clark and Subic – does not indicate an ideal solution or a panacea.

The gradual departure of US forces from the Philippines and Thailand has coincided with south-east Asia returning to its pre-colonial era sense of non-alignment. With both national and regional sovereignty, the region has also been asserting its sense of independence in the world. Contested issues like how "terrorism" should be defined form part of the range of subjects under review or consideration.[23]

Established arrangements like the Five-Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA) comprising Britain, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand are expected to continue. The FPDA's roots lie in the 1957 Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (AMDA). A measure of the established status of such arrangements is that even after decades, the FPDA has not included Indonesia, which lies within its geographical span,

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[22] Junichi Yamamoto, 'Japan gets good marks in poll / S.E. Asian countries have "good impression"; S. Korea less upbeat,' *Yomiuri Shimbun* / *The Daily Yomiuri*, 5 September 2006; Philip Bowring, 'Asia will welcome a more outgoing Japan,' *International Herald Tribune*, 2 October 2006

[23] Vanessa Arrington, 'Nonaligned want terrorism redefined,' Associated Press, 12 September 2006

or Brunei, a member of both ASEAN and the British Commonwealth. A realist's interpretation of the FPDA is that apart from the stated objective of capacity-building for disaster relief and humanitarian operations, its main strategic purpose today is mutual confidence-building between Malaysia and Singapore.

Among ASEAN's pillars are the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, and the SEANWFZ (South-East Asia Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone) and ZOPFAN (Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality) declarations. Among the precepts are renouncing the use of force in settling disputes, non-intervention in the internal affairs of member states, and prohibition of the manufacture, processing, trade, storage or use of nuclear weapons in the region. It is remarkable how these and other ASEAN principles were readily accepted by all ASEAN members and the countries of north-east Asia, stemming from a commonality that must count as a factor in the sense of East Asian regionalism.

ASEAN is also in the driving seat of the 25-member ARF, which may be inclusive to a fault. The ARF's generous inclusivity may be one reason why contributions by individual member states are at least as important in assessing its progress as its ASEAN stewardship. This means that, with a larger membership than even APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum), the full ARF membership is at least as much to blame as ASEAN for any inertia or loss of momentum.

ASEAN counts for much in South-East Asia, yet ASEAN is nothing if not security cooperation. Since its inception in 1967, security has been its core concern even if that is seldom cited officially. As a functional organisation, ASEAN is the premier confidence-building mechanism of the region built around security. It is like the FPDA writ-large for all 10 members, but with a concept of national and regional security beyond defence arrangements and which benefit all members equally, without being underwritten or overseen by other countries outside the region.

Key to understanding ASEAN in a security context, or how the ASEAN Security Community project might develop, is a proper understanding of ASEAN's origins. Contrary to common speculation, ASEAN did not begin as a Cold War anti-communist bloc but as a strategic regional confidence-building mechanism based on fraternal partnership and dynamic cooperation among neighbouring states. Cold War instruments inspired by Western powers, such as the military-based SEATO (South-East Asia Treaty Organisation), had only two south-east Asian countries – US military allies Thailand and the Philippines – among its eight members and proved short-lived. Countries more inclined to non-alignment like Indonesia and Malaysia did not join SEATO, and later formed the core of ASEAN instead.

The 1960s was a tempestuous time for south-east Asia, particularly for Indonesia and Malaysia: Sukarno had been deposed by Suharto, and Indonesia's policy of *konfrontasi* (confrontation) against Malaysia was in apparent abeyance; the Philippines exercised a claim to Sabah, and Singapore had separated from Malaysia. In this time of

uncertainty, national leaders in the region were certain of three things in the interests of their respective nations: that they could not afford to repeat the mistakes of the past; that this was an opportune time to forge a brave new regional future together; and that what they chose to do would determine the future of the region.

This period also saw several communist-led insurgencies in isolated pockets in Thailand, Malaya, the Philippines and Indonesia. However, they were home-grown movements with limited reach, had little or no regional coordination among themselves, received few if any supplies from major communist countries, were overpowered by the state and outnumbered by security forces, and amid the Sino-Soviet split their Maoist inspiration meant they were even less of a Soviet-backed Cold War pawn. For the governments of south-east Asia, the larger security problem lay in the possible misperceptions and malign actions of neighbouring governments.

In 1961, the Association of South-East Asia (ASA) was formed. Very soon, it looked like Malaya was set to expand its territory to include Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore, a situation that Indonesia and the Philippines dreaded. In July 1963, Manila called a three-nation summit on the formation of MAPHILINDO (MAlaya-PHILippines-INDOnesia), which some regarded as an Indonesian and Philippine attempt to block Malaya's plan to form Malaysia. Two months later (in September 1963) Malaysia was formed.

By 1966-67, Sukarno had handed power to the New Order regime of Suharto. Malaysian leaders were uncertain of how the new Indonesian leaders would deal with it, and adding to the uncertainty was Singapore's recent (1965) departure to become an independent country while the Philippines had not abandoned its claim to Sabah. There were strong incentives to form a new intra-regional organisation through enhanced understanding and cooperation. By August 1967 ASEAN was formed, subsuming ASA and transcending MAPHILINDO, with the leaders at the time camouflaging this by publicly stressing "social and economic cooperation" instead.[24]

Since then, an outstanding feature of ASEAN's security posture is how some seemingly paradoxical positions can be adopted at the same time. These apparent paradoxes include how ASEAN member states relate to one another in maintaining regional security. Whether the same situation applies in ASEAN's individual security relations with external parties may depend on the particular circumstances of each case. But within ASEAN, a consistent pattern seems to have developed.

This concerns how, despite member states entertaining differences over disputed territorial claims with no end in sight, they tend to close ranks whenever the larger

[24] Bernard Krisher and Ryun Patterson, 'Today's world is almost like a world at war' interview with Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in ASEAN Supplement, *Cambodia Daily*, 4 November 2002; discussion on ASEAN by former Malaysian foreign minister Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, Genting Highlands, Malaysia, 1994

interest of regional security is deemed to be at stake. Whether the national security doctrine of each member is collective security or comprehensive security, the regional security needs are commonly understood to require joint and coordinated effort. Decades of conducting joint patrols, interdiction missions and search-and-destroy operations against insurgent groups in border areas between adjacent member countries have heightened this ASEAN attribute.

The situation is such that any external party would be unwise to test the resolve of ASEAN member states in maintaining regional security. The role of any such interloper would further serve as a catalyst for a more unified ASEAN position. If some ASEAN countries happen to have bilateral differences between themselves at the time, intervention by an external party is likely to occasion an opportunity to close ranks. But since the member countries may also be divided in respect of the external party, ASEAN unity remains a major priority that could be advanced by further economic and social integration.

This convergence of interests signifies the indivisibility of ASEAN's various dimensions in the furtherance of its interests: political, strategic, economic and social. It is evidenced in the daily experience of ASEAN countries, and acknowledged in documents like the 2003 Bali Concord II. States external to South-East Asia, including several major world powers, may value the waterways straddling the ASEAN region, but none value them more than ASEAN member states themselves, since the area comprises their national territories and immediate neighbourhood.

This reality is borne out in the ASEAN record of safeguarding regional security. Policing illicit activities and conducting search-and-rescue operations have long been priorities, along with other responsibilities and challenges. As these grow in severity, the relevant ASEAN member states respond accordingly and proportionately. This applies no less to the most widely publicised concerns: piracy and terrorism.

To address these concerns in the Straits of Malacca for example, three countries initially came together to work out the modalities for concerted action: Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. When it seemed that Thailand also needed to be part of the process, it was swiftly included and so joined the group as an equal partner. This underscores the highly pragmatic, timely, inclusive, non-ideological and non-emotional approach to intra-ASEAN security cooperation and coordination.

Another instance of seamless ASEAN security cooperation can be seen in the suspected terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah. As soon as the cross-border phenomenon of the threat was understood, the police forces of the ASEAN countries concerned rose to the occasion in coordinating their operations. The results have been better than if individual national police forces acted on their own, separate from their counterparts in the other countries. Today, security cooperation in investigating such threats is better than ever, never with any doubt that it would be less than what is required.

There appears to be an unwritten understanding among ASEAN member countries that whatever problems each faces as an individual country, it should not bring them into its relations with the others. There is also the understanding that while larger regional problems may impact on a country negatively, each country's internal problems need not be addressed or be resolvable by the regional community. The result is that firstly, unsolicited intervention is nearly always unwelcome, and secondly even while a member country may be experiencing difficulties, it should not neglect its responsibilities to the region and to ASEAN.

Inevitably, because ASEAN institutions and processes have been dominated by government officials and policymakers, academic and other independent inputs have been meagre or absent. And so it is said that civil society contributions to the evolution of ASEAN security concepts are underdeveloped, and their prospects "under-theorised."[25] However, given ASEAN's pragmatic if slow adaptive qualities, broader regional exchanges from a wider cross-section of society (Tracks 2 and 3)[26] are under way.

Some lessons may be drawn from the experiences of south-east Asia for application elsewhere, such as north-east Asia. The bilateral challenges between Japan and China and between Japan and South Korea have their own distinct origins and tendencies, but some exchanges of ideas may prove fruitful. Although ASEAN has yet to solve all the problems among its members, for the countries of north-east Asia to replicate the sense of regional community that ASEAN nonetheless enjoys can only promote the prospects of the larger East Asian Community.

Epilogue

An organisation like ASEAN is often taken for granted and therefore underrated. However, one way to assess the value of ASEAN is to consider what south-east Asia would be like today without it. Alternatively, consider what each south-east Asian country would not have been able to achieve had there been no ASEAN. Such a situation may be difficult to imagine because while the stakes have become so high all-round – in economic, sociocultural, political, diplomatic and security terms – old problems like rival territorial claims remain while new challenges like non-traditional threats grow. At the same time, economic integration grows relentlessly. If ASEAN had

[25] Johan Saravanamuttu, 'Whither the ASEAN Security Community? Some Reflections,' IJAPS Vol. 1, 2005 (inaugural issue)

[26] In recent years, regular non-governmental gatherings have been taking place under ASEAN auspices, with the formation of the ASEAN Business Council, ASEAN-ISIS think-tanks and the ASEAN People's Assembly.

not emerged earlier as it did, it would for some time now have to be invented just the same.

Much of the south-east Asian experience applies to East Asia as a whole. The broadly similar realities have generally taken longer to become evident in East Asia, but they are more compelling for that. The dynamism of East Asia is expressed not only in terms of national economic growth, but also regional economic integration. The question is whether the components of East Asia – ASEAN, China, Japan and Korea – can work together quickly enough and well enough to build an integrated, coordinated and harmonised East Asia to make full use of the opportunities and avoid the pitfalls as they develop.

Just as the challenges of south-east Asia would have made the region without ASEAN incomprehensible, the realities of East Asia are making the region without an EAC inconceivable. There are at least 10 reasons for the countries of East Asia to establish an EAC forthwith:

1. As economic integration grows in intensity and complexity, better planning and coordination are needed to avoid likely disjunctures, explore all possibilities, and fully utilise all available opportunities;

2. The generally good diplomatic relations in East Asia should be developed further, so that existing problems as represented by North Korea and Myanmar are superseded and eventually displaced as problems;

3. To evolve a cohesive regional system of states to give early warning of impending economic or political crisis, gauge its impact and identify some implications, so that timely evasive or remedial action can be taken more effectively;

4. The similarly good political linkages should be built upon, to complement close economic relations and avoid possible disruptions through misunderstanding, keen competition or territorial rivalry as the stakes continue to rise;

5. To improve terms of trade for smoother, more rapid and better coordinated growth through greater joint prosperity;

6. To strengthen sociocultural linkages with more people-to-people contact and travel, both for its own sake as well as to provide better public support for official policies and economic activities;

7. To develop a well-integrated regional system of institutions to identify and develop key human resource potential for various vital industries;

8. To develop a profound sense of shared security considerations that go beyond particular strategic concerns, but which also subsume all such individual challenges;

9. To broaden and deepen confidence-building measures through better communication, more exchanges and improved transparency as facilitated by closer all-round relations;

10. To build a better organised regional system to prevent and improve monitoring of dangerous or criminal activity across borders.

Then from ASEAN, there are also demonstrably advantageous aspects of the ASEAN way that north-east Asia might wish to inculcate or develop:

(a) An insightful realism that values what is practicable, acceptable, workable and beneficial over the ideological, individual, whimsical or emotional;

(b) A sense of unity for greater regional purpose, through mutual assistance and the collective defence of individual and shared interests;

(c) A consciousness that the national prerogatives of any country that impact on the region are in reality national interests which are only part of the larger regional interests;

(d) An awareness that the size, wealth or power of individual member states do not signify additional rights or special privileges, only surplus resources that may be used for the betterment of the region and never against its collective interests;

(e) The knowledge that regardless of size, wealth or power, regional membership requires equal commitment and responsibilities from all, and from which all members derive equal rights;

(f) An enlightened self-interest seeking to cultivate a unified regional culture for nurturing mutual care and concern among member nations, to forestall or prevent unwelcome unilateral action by any entity.

Building a new East Asia today in which countries are fundamentally at peace with one another, and in which people enjoy rising standards of living, are important for the following key reasons:

1. All member countries, being neighbours in an important region of the world, would benefit from both the process and the result;

2. These benefits are multi-dimensional, being primarily economic, diplomatic, political and social, while being mutually reinforcing between these various dimensions;

3. The accumulating gains from a dedicated East Asian identity would raise the levels of peace and prosperity throughout the region, with these being the prime universal goals of nations everywhere;

4. By translating nationalism that had historically been negative in much of East Asia into a positive regionalism, the stakes for the region as a whole are also enlarged in a globalised world;

5. There is no better time to begin building a new regionalism than the present, to invest early in the future, especially when there is now diplomatic readiness to do so regionwide.