



ASEAN CENTRALITY: HISTORY AND INSTITUTIONAL ANCHORING OF RELATIONS

WILLIAM J. JONES¹

Mahidol University International College¹
william.jon@mahidol.edu¹

Abstract - *The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed in 1967 with the Bangkok Conference as a bulwark against the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia. In its five decades of existence ASEAN has shown itself to be a remarkably durable organization and exemplar of third world regionalism. With the closing of the Unipolar period where the United States and its Western allies held a dominant place in international affairs, a new global architecture. This new period of great power competition holds a great degree of uncertainty for ASEAN's members. Being comprised of small and medium size states, ASEAN cannot impose its will on major powers. However, due to the de facto position of ASEAN as the only East Asian wide regional organization it stands as the central node for diplomacy. This article will demonstrate that ASEAN will continue to play a pivotal and central role in East Asian international relations.*

Keywords: ASEAN; ASEAN Centrality; Multipolarity; Small States

INTRODUCTION

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, hereafter ASEAN was established in 1967 with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration, colloquially known as the Bangkok Declaration (ASEAN, 1967). This marked an end to very tumultuous period for newly independent states of the region. The signing of the Bangkok Declaration coincided with the deposing of Indonesia's 1st president, Mohammad Sukarno who was overthrown in a palace coup by his top general, Muhammad Suharto (Sapiie, 2017). It was speculated and now proven that the United States played a major role in the overthrow of Indonesia's president due to fears that he had become too close to the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) (Scott, 1985). Regardless, with the overthrow of Sukarno Indonesia's foreign policy shifted from the previous policy of Konfrontasi, open conflict with the Federation of Malaya over the Malay Bornean states of Sabah and Sarawak (Sutter, 1966). Suharto's foreign policy shift put Indonesia within the American sphere of influence whilst still having one foot in the non-aligned movement (Berger, 1997). With Konfrontasi ended the newly independent states of Southeast Asia could engage in the process of nation-building and a region wide policy of rolling back communism with the implicit understanding that no other ASEAN state would support any movement seeking to undermine another ASEAN member (Poon-Kim, 1977; Wey, 2021). This opened the possibility for a period of relative peace to emerge and spread throughout the region over the next decade. It was only with the American withdrawal from the Vietnam war and the subsequent Vietnamese unification of Vietnam from north to south under the control of the nationalist/communist did ASEAN face a crisis moment, especially the ASEAN frontline state of Thailand (Mohan, 1981; Morris, 1999). This stimulated ASEAN to finally meet again in Bali 1976 and formally sign ASEAN's first quasi-legal document in the face of the fear of communist spread. ASEAN Foreign Ministers met in 1976 when they signed the Bali Concord I (ASEAN, 1976a), formally known as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (ASEAN, 1976b).

The fear of communist spread was further accentuated in 1978 when the Vietnamese government made the decision to invade its neighbor, Democratic Kampuchea in order to halt the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime from committing genocide against ethnic Vietnamese residing near the border (Mount, 1979; Simon, 1987; Southgate, 2015; Stirling, 1980). ASEAN members joined ranks in foreign policy position to oppose Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia in the United Nations in support of Pol Pot deposed government. This support continued throughout the 1980s keeping the Cambodia issue on the international radar until ASEAN changed tact in the late 1980s in support of a peaceful resolution of the conflict within the framework of the Paris Peace Accords Alagappa, 1993; Jones, 2007; Sanglee, 2022).



In the post-Cold War period ASEAN remade itself by finding a new *raison d'être* in economic integration. With the threat of communism no longer a security threat ASEAN states welcomed former adversarial states of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam as members of ASEAN in the 1990's. The unipolar period of American and Western hegemony fit well with ASEAN member states development policies which were in tune with the neoliberal order fashioned under President Clinton. However, with the rise of China and dramatic change in American foreign policy under President Trump from accommodation with China to economic coercion the friction of great power rivalry and competition has now set into Southeast Asia. ASEAN states are increasingly being pulled into one of the two camps as the great powers jostle for influence in the region. This paper seeks to center the understanding of ASEAN Centrality and provide a broad conceptual framework for the complex network of security and economic relations between ASEAN states and the respective great powers, China and the United States.

METHOD AND FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

This paper will draw on an historical analysis of ASEAN states relationships with China and the United States by focusing on security and economic relationships and how these fit into the ASEAN's regional lattice of institutional forums. Network security will used as framework for understanding the complex relationships between the great powers and ASEAN states. Primarily the authors will focus on existing treaty and security relations between ASEAN states and the United States and the nature of macro-economic relations between China and ASEAN states. The authors will argue that ASEAN centrality is a *de facto* historical factor that will continue to provide ASEAN mechanisms and legitimacy in international politics. ASEAN will continue to be a central node of relations between the great powers in East Asia and allow ASEAN states to continue with their foreign policies of 'hedging' between the great powers for strategic autonomy.

The ability of small and medium sizes ASEAN states to exert this degree of influence during the Cold War gave ASEAN a great degree of credibility in the eyes of the international community and ASEAN's partners to organize regional security in an autonomous manner (Acharya, 2001; Jones & Jenne, 2015). The historical legacy of the Cold War and ASEAN's ability to deal with security issues and organize regional security and governance will be the focus of this paper. In particular the central contention of author is to advance the notion that whilst the international relations is moving from an American Unipolar to a multipolar world the legacy of East Asian international relations will dictate that ASEAN continue to play an important role in wider East Asian affairs. The author will argue that increasing great power competition between China, Russia and the United States will not detract from ASEAN centrality. In fact given the constellation of relations between East Asian states *de facto* ASEAN will be the primary game in town for the great powers to exercise diplomacy and international politics.

ASEAN Centrality: Network Institutionalism

The notion of ASEAN Centrality centers on three important and connected factors. First, the legacy of ASEAN being a Cold War organization able to reimagine itself and fashion a new regional trajectory in the post-Cold War era. Second, is the *de facto* standing of ASEAN being the only regional organization in East Asia. As such *de facto* ASEAN is an important node of connectivity in international affairs between great powers of the East and West. Amador has argued that ASEAN's position as a central node in East Asian Affairs was *de facto* in absence of any other viable alternative and has led to a hodgepodge of issue and general based institutionalization (Amador III, 2010). Ba provides nuance to this by arguing that institutions such as APEC which were led by Australia and Japan coupled with pressure by external powers for institutionalization led ASEAN to take the lead in creating the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) after a half dozen other proposals from external powers did not materialize (Ba, 2009 p. 385).

Cabellero-Anthony understands centrality as the ability to lead. Cabellero-Anthony points to a few major factors of normative principles and network institutionalism which incorporates all major world powers as well as extra regional powers (Cabellero-Anthony, 2014). Mark Beeson has argued brilliantly that East Asian regionalism, be seen through the lens of indigenous mobilization. Beeson



takes an historical view to argue that the lack of regionalism in East Asia is largely due to the manner in which America dealt with the region via its foreign policy. During the Cold War the United States engaged on a bilateral basis through a hub and spokes model rather than a uniform integrative approach in Europe with NATO and the European Coal and Steel Community (Beeson, 2005). The crux of this approach lay the hegemon's method of engaging with ASEAN states which was on bilateral rather than multilateral basis. Implicit in Beeson's analysis is that ASEAN regionalism took place indigenously but also against America's policy seen in the undermining of Malaysia's attempt to establish the East Asian Economic Caucus of the early 1990's (Ibid, p. 979).

Both of these factors point to internal and external motivations for ASEAN's centrality. ASEAN centrality can also be understood from the perspective of regional lattice of uneven networks of institutional frameworks. ASEAN's external institutionalization began in 1994 with the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum to establish security dialogue in the greater Asia-Pacific region. In the aftermath of the Asian Economic Crisis of 1997-1998 regionalism took on tone of urgency and one of a twin characteristic by broadening security-based issues to include traditional and non-traditional issues and also deeper economic integration. This was seen first in the ASEAN Plus Three formula with ASEAN reaching out to Northeast Asia. Then broadening its engagement with the East Asia Summit which brought together all of ASEAN's strategic partners. This was continually paralleled by the ASEAN Plus economic frameworks beginning with ASEAN-China in 2002 and encompassing Hong Kong by 2018.

Ba points to the ARF, ADMM and ADMM Plus initiatives as being emblematic of ASEAN's ability to 'socialize' parties and be a viable platform for strategic dialogue on issues such as transnational crime, terrorism to the South China Sea. The ability of ASEAN through its normative framework of equality and informality is credited with the success of being a platform for great powers such as China and the USA (Ba, 2017). This of course can be countered by the argument that socialization is 'skin deep' on some issues such as the SCS where the Code of Conduct has not been agreed in over two decades of dialogue (Parameswaran, 2023). ASEAN Plus Three was built on the success of the ARF to broaden the agenda from strictly security-based issues to include economic agendas with ASEAN three primary trade partners in Northeast Asia; China, Japan and Korea. This stemmed from the internal integrative process of ASEAN itself seen in the push towards the ASEAN Free Trade Area and economic liberalism to capitalize on the global free trade movement and place ASEAN as a critical global supply chain link (Beeson, 2002; Beeson, 2003; Nesadurai, 2009; Simon, 2008). The Western correlate to the APT is the Asia-Europe Meeting between ASEAN and European Union in 1996 which has expanding to include 53 countries (ASEM, 2023). The strategic dialogue between the two regional organizations is credited with expanding cooperation and two-way socialization as 'liberal' norms of human rights and democracy are essentials of EU dialogue (Allison, 2015; Gaens, 2008; Murray, 2008; Robles, 2007)

Table 1: ASEAN Mechanisms and Membership
ASEAN Regional Integrative Mechanisms

Mechanism	Established	Members
ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)	1994	<u>ASEAN</u> , Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, <u>China</u> , Democratic People's Republic of Korea, European Union, <u>India</u> , Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Korea, <u>Russia</u> , Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, <u>United States</u>
Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)	1996	<u>ASEAN</u> , European Union, Australia, Bangladesh, <u>China</u> , <u>India</u> , Japan, Kazakhstan, Republic of Korea, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, <u>Russia</u> , Switzerland, United Kingdom
ASEAN Plus Three (APT)	1999	<u>ASEAN</u> , <u>China</u> , Japan, Republic of Korea
East Asia Summit (EAS)	2005	<u>ASEAN</u> , <u>China</u> , <u>India</u> , Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russia, <u>United States</u>



ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM)	2006	ASEAN
ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus)	2010	<u>ASEAN</u> , Australia, <u>China</u> , <u>India</u> , Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, <u>Russia</u> , <u>United States</u>
ASEAN Plus Six (APS)	2002-2018	<u>ASEAN</u> , Australia/New Zealand, Republic of Korea, <u>China</u> , Hong Kong, <u>India</u> , Japan

Table 2: ASEAN Mechanisms and Major Power Membership
ASEAN Mechanisms and the Great Powers

ASEAN Mechanism	China	India	Russia	USA
ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)	✓	✓	✓	
ASEAN Plus Three (APT)	✓			
East Asia Summit (EAS)	✓	✓	✓	✓
ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM)				
ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus)	✓	✓	✓	✓
ASEAN Plus Six (APS)	✓	✓		

The diagram and tables articulate a form of networked institutionalism which has been created by ASEAN in the post-Cold War era. Whilst, all great powers are not members of all ASEAN external relations frameworks, all strategic powers are members in one or more of ASEAN’s constellation of institutions. Each institution has its agenda which ranges from narrow of the ADMM Plus, to mid, ARF, to broad, East Asia Summit. At the center of all this network is the node of ASEAN member states.

The ASEAN Way: Norms, Socialization and International Affairs

ASEAN’s principles mirror principles articulated in the UN Charter (United Nations Charter, 1945; Article 2.1, 2.3, 2.4, 2.6) and find their origins of the state system with the Treaty of Westphalia (Asbach and Schröder (2014)). These principles are sovereignty, non-intervention and peaceful settlement of disputes. Combined with the way ASEAN does business of consultation and consensus constituted the ‘ASEAN Way’ which informs all aspects of interaction, decision-making and regional integration within ASEAN (Acharya, 1997; Acharya, 2001; Acharya, 2005; Ba, 2009; Jones, 2011a; Jones, 2011b; Nischalke, 2002; Stubbs, 2008). These principles are embodied in ASEAN’s constitutive institutional documents of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and are echoed in the ASEAN Charter (ASEAN, 1976 Article 2, 10, 11, 13; ASEAN, 2007 Article 2). Consultation and consensus as procedural norms dictate that ASEAN diplomacy always seeks to find a common denominator among its member states, which at times and in the case of AICHR ‘a best that we could [was possible] result’ (Narine, 1997 p. 365; Narine, 1999 p. 360; Sebastian and Lanti, 2010 p. 155).

The ASEAN Way has at its core a few important characteristics that impact the manner in which ASEAN interacts with external partners. On a normative level the ASEAN Way denotes informality in relations between members and partners. Informality dictates that a non-confrontational approach to relations without formal voting procedures and produces a lack of standing institutional structures within ASEAN structures. This takes decision-making to policy makers on an interpersonal level. Acharya argues from a sociocultural perspective that this leads ‘stickiness’ whereby states and leaders that lack trust or familiarity can slowly build relations in a functional and non-threatening manner leading to further cooperation (Acharya, 2001). Haacke takes this further by arguing that the ASEAN Way has produced a diplomatic community which mediates disputes and bridges relations through a process of socialization within the context of ASEAN norms (Haacke, 2003). All of ASEAN’s external institutions are guided by the ASEAN Way framework.

Important to understanding the notion of credibility lay in ASEAN being the convenor of all these integrative measures. As such the ASEAN Chair (which rotates annually) convenes and chairs all the



meetings of the different mechanisms. This allows ASEAN to bring together disparate perspectives and interests and find a common agenda which can set, thus putting ASEAN in the driver's seat. Second, are the ground rules which are emblematic of ASEAN writ large; non-antagonistic, non-accusatory, informal and consensus based (Acharya, 1997; Beeson, 2008; Jones, 2010; Jones, 2011; Roberts, 2012). Lastly, Whilst, some ASEAN states are security treaty partners with the United States, ASEAN is seen as a credible vector for constructive dialogue as all states are non-threatening small and medium size states. They also carry-on peaceful relations with all dialogue partners on a non-partisan basis hence, ASEAN legitimacy.

DISCUSSION


This paper has briefly articulated that notion of ASEAN Centrality and the architecture of how ASEAN fits within the larger global network of great power relations. ASEAN's role is one of being a conveyor in many multilateral forums. ASEAN also has the ability to set the agenda within these ASEAN led forums across different issue areas. Lastly, in accordance with the ASEAN Way, it is argued by many scholars that ASEAN's power is in its ability to socialize states with which it engages in accordance to its principles. It must be noted that the great powers all have different governance systems, normative expectations and foreign policies. When they convene in ASEAN forums however, the ASEAN Way of conducting business is the norm with which all other powers conform to in their relations. This leads ASEAN to exercise influence in the agenda, issues, format and manner in which complex relations are conducted. This is the centrality of ASEAN. When great powers do not see eye to eye or have interests which are in conflict ASEAN is seen as a neutral and non-threatening venue for diplomacy to take place at the highest levels. This is not to say that ASEAN is powerful or can push others around to ASEAN's point of view. This is not so. ASEAN's power lay in its norms and forums for meeting, socializing and familiarizing.


CONCLUSION

This paper has provided a brief overview of the notion of ASEAN Centrality and how it plays out in terms of a regional architecture and the nature and forms of relations that are undertaken in the guise of ASEAN. The authors have demonstrated that ASEAN's position is a de facto consequence of the Cold War but also how ASEAN has crafted complex interaction in the post-Cold War period to suit its ends and the ends of its member states. While lacking in depth this paper has attempted bridge different scholarly interpretations to provide an overview of how to understand ASEAN and its external relations.

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