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# The Effectiveness of ASEAN under External Pressure: Cases of Myanmar's Accession and the South China Sea Disputes

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**CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE**

**THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ASEAN UNDER EXTERNAL PRESSURE:  
CASES OF MYANMAR'S ACCESSION AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTES**

SUBMITTED TO

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AND

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is guided by a collection of principles known as the ASEAN Way, which emphasizes sovereignty and consensus. When external pressures have forced ASEAN to face contentious issues, internal divisions have torn at the group's cohesion, and consensus has proved difficult to reach. When Myanmar's military dictatorship was put on the fast track to ASEAN membership in the mid-1990s, democratic Thailand and the Philippines objected, and strong Western pressure to delay Burmese accession put the group in a difficult spot. Fifteen years later, territorial disputes in the South China Sea pitted ASEAN claimant states against non-claimant counterparts inclined to support an assertive and wealthy China's point of view. In the first case, reaction against US attempts to sway ASEAN's decision united the group in support of Myanmar's admission; in the second case, China's economic inducements succeeded in dividing the group, to the extent that a 2012 summit ended in disagreement and rancor. ASEAN will need to revise some aspects of the ASEAN Way, particularly sovereignty norms, and create greater binding force to generate the cohesion necessary to effectively deal with future regional problems.

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In 1967, five middle powers of Southeast Asia came together to form a regional grouping aimed at containing conflict between themselves and minimizing the intrusion of outside powers. Almost half a century later, ASEAN, or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, not only endures but has become a critical piece of the global geostrategic architecture. In terms of sheer numbers, the grouping's importance is manifest: together, its now ten member states are home to about 630 million people, almost exactly double the size of the United States and 8.8% of the world total. ASEAN's combined nominal GDP exceeds \$2.3 trillion, comparable to the eighth-largest economy in the world.<sup>1</sup> Growth rates in all but two member states are 5% or greater.

More crucially, ASEAN is the strategic fulcrum of the broader Asia-Pacific region. The association embraces the South China Sea, through which passes over half of the world's trade, including a third of crude oil trade;<sup>2</sup> the adjacent Malacca Strait, ensconced between three ASEAN members, is a key shipping chokepoint and handles 80% of China's crude oil imports and 90% of Japan's.<sup>3</sup> Geography has meant that ASEAN is the primary arena of competition between the Asian great powers, with China, Japan, the United States, and India all vying for influence in the region. This makes for a volatile state of affairs, but has also allowed ASEAN to take the lead in Asia-Pacific regionalism, a process which the great powers cannot trust each other to manage. ASEAN forms the

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<sup>1</sup> "The world factbook," Central Intelligence Agency, last modified September 26, 2013, accessed October 20, 2013, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon Chang, "China and the biggest territory grab since World War II," *Forbes*, June 2, 2013, accessed October 20, 2013, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/gordonchang/2013/06/02/china-and-the-biggest-territory-grab-since-world-war-ii/>.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Tarrant, "Factbox – Malacca Strait is a strategic 'chokepoint,'" *Reuters*, March 4, 2010, accessed October 20, 2013, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2010/03/04/idINIndia-46652220100304>.

core of the ASEAN+3 arrangement, a cooperative grouping with China, Japan, and South Korea; the Chiang Mai Initiative, an ASEAN+3 currency swap framework; the East Asia Summit, a regional forum of comprehensive focus which brings together the +3 countries as well as India, Australia, New Zealand, Russia, and the United States; and the ASEAN Regional Forum, a security-focused group of the EAS members plus several extra-regional states. It is also bringing together its six current FTA partners to form the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a free-trade area that will encompass most of the Asia-Pacific region by 2015.

Not only has ASEAN provided the structural foundation for Asia-Pacific regionalism, it also sets the tone for intra-regional politics. Norms of interaction in the region are based on the collection of principles known as the ASEAN Way, the doctrinal cornerstone of the association that includes negotiation, non-intervention, and the primacy of sovereignty. As ASEAN led the push for Asia-Pacific regionalization, the grouping also promoted its Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, the written embodiment of those principles, as a code of conduct in the region.<sup>4</sup> It began to request that nations interested in deeper ties with ASEAN sign on to the treaty, and when the EAS was established in 2005 accession to the TAC was made a prerequisite for participation. The supremacy of the ASEAN Way in Asia was cemented by early support from China and India, both of whom share many of these values with the ASEAN states and signed the treaty in 2003; and Japan's eagerness to assert itself in the emerging regionalism, signing on nine

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<sup>4</sup> Susumu Yamakage, "The construction of an East Asian order and the limitations of the ASEAN model," *Asia-Pacific Review* 12, no. 2 (2005): 3, doi:10.1080/13439000500392810.

months later in 2004. The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation now has nineteen signatories outside of ASEAN,<sup>5</sup> and serves as a baseline for the conduct of regional politics.

The ASEAN Way has always attracted skepticism for its slow-moving, process-oriented nature; in recent years, though, the ability of ASEAN itself to manage regional affairs has been thrown in doubt. Tensions have risen sharply as China has more aggressively asserted its claims to the South China Sea, and with member states under siege from Chinese pressure the association has failed to bring resolution or even notable progress on the issue. At the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting of 2012, the organization for the first time in its history failed to issue its annual communique after a political stalemate over the disputes developed – Vietnam and the Philippines, the two members bearing the brunt of Chinese antagonism, insisted on the mention of incidents between their countries and China, while the Cambodian chair, with Laos and Myanmar’s backing, refused. Typically the principles of the ASEAN Way prescribe a process of consensus-building, of moving towards the middle and taking a universally acceptable position, to achieve a united front on contentious issues. Rifts within the organization won out, however, and the ASEAN Way appears to have failed. The South China Sea disputes are today the most dangerous flashpoint in Asia; if the region’s current modus operandi is unable to manage the situation, the consequences for peace and stability may be serious.

Why was ASEAN unable to reach a compromise on this issue? In the mid-1990s, the association faced another controversial problem under the strain of external pressure as it struggled to make a decision on authoritarian Myanmar’s accession to the group. The West, particularly the United States, urged ASEAN not to allow the country to join;

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<sup>5</sup> Rolleiv Solholm, “Norway signs South East Asia Treaty of Amity and Cooperation,” *Norway Post*, July 3, 2013, accessed October 20, 2013, <http://www.norwaypost.no/index.php/news/latest-news/28708->.

further sanctions against Myanmar loomed, and the fate of cooperation with both the US and the EU, as well as the organization's reputation within the international community, was under threat. Member states were deeply divided over the issue, and argued over how best to deal with the Yangon junta. Thailand and the Philippines objected to the regime's repressive character and maintained that Myanmar's accession should be conditional on internal political reform, while Indonesia and Malaysia insisted that the country be received into the group on schedule regardless of domestic political performance.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, they came together from their various disparate viewpoints and forged a consensus, admitting the Myanmar government into ASEAN in the face of harsh outside pressure. What has prevented a similar outcome in the debates over the South China Sea disputes?

The association's increased size – it now comprises ten member states rather than just seven – may be one factor. Building consensus in a diverse group is difficult, and each voice that is added represents a new point of view pulling in a different direction that must be reconciled with the whole. Cohesion becomes harder and harder to achieve. Furthermore, the threat perceptions of the various member states towards China are vastly divergent. Phnom Penh is considered by some to be essentially a “diplomatic surrogate” for Beijing,<sup>7</sup> while to Hanoi the great power to the north is a continual menace. With such enormous differences in outlook, can a process of internal negotiation and consensus-building succeed in managing the South China Sea problem? Or, perhaps, have the newer members not been properly socialized to bow to other states' priorities and adjust their

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<sup>6</sup> Kay Moller, “Cambodia and Burma: The ASEAN Way ends here,” *Asian Survey* 38, no. 12 (1998): 1092, doi:10.2307/2645823

<sup>7</sup> Sheldon Simon, “US-Southeast Asia relations: ASEAN stumbles,” *Comparative Connections* 14, no. 2 (2012): 49, [http://csis.org/files/publication/1202qus\\_seasia.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/1202qus_seasia.pdf).

own positions to reach a united front? Did the ASEAN Way fail, or was it not followed closely enough? Another consideration is the stakes each state faces: Cambodia and Laos depend on Chinese money to fund their continued growth and modernization,<sup>8, 9</sup> and undoubtedly fear the penalties for angering Beijing. The claimants, for their part, face the infringement of their national waters by a hostile rising power and the loss of potentially rich oil and gas reserves.<sup>10</sup> On top of all this, China has thus far refused to recognize the right of ASEAN to negotiate on behalf of its members, instead demanding bilateral negotiations in which it will have an overwhelming advantage over its smaller neighbors.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations was founded to empower its members, to guard their sovereignty and strengthen their voice through cooperation and solidarity. Unable to achieve these, ASEAN will have little power to resolve the South China Sea disputes, or any other regional quandaries. The rivalry between Asia's great powers will ensure ASEAN's continued centrality to Asia-Pacific regionalism in the short term; but the whole region will suffer from the organization's inability to generate cohesion and present a united front. ASEAN must make a show of responsible leadership and earnestly confront the South China Sea dispute to prevent centrifugal forces from further destabilizing the region; it must also do more to bring its member states into line and ensure their commitment to ASEAN over external powers. This will likely require a concerted multilateral effort to wean newer members off of their dependency on Chinese aid. Parties in the region may have to break with longtime policy principles to transform

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<sup>8</sup> Chun Han Wong, "U.S. faces China hurdle in Cambodia," *Wall Street Journal*, November 15, 2012, accessed October 21, 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324595904578120582308358540>.

<sup>9</sup> "China becomes biggest investor in Laos," *Global Times*, October 21, 2013, accessed October 21, 2013, [http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/819226.shtml#.UmWld\\_mkqFg](http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/819226.shtml#.UmWld_mkqFg).

<sup>10</sup> "South China Sea," US Energy Information Administration, last modified February 7, 2013, accessed October 22, 2013, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/regions-topics.cfm?fips=SCS>.

the current deadlock. The US, for example, should consider increasing aid to Phnom Penh despite its authoritarian politics and poor human rights record. And ASEAN, operating under a philosophy that has served its purpose well thus far but is now increasingly unsuited to today's challenges, will have to significantly modify its approach to internal and external dealings. The ASEAN Way must be rewritten.

## THE ASEAN WAY

At its founding in 1967, ASEAN was essentially a non-aggression pact between five distrustful neighbors. Indonesia had just concluded its unsuccessful *Konfrontasi* campaign against the newly-formed Malaysia; tiny Singapore had been expelled from the Malaysian confederation due to racial tensions, and worried for its safety; and the Philippines claimed ownership of the northern third of Malaysian Borneo. Thailand and Malaysia each faced internal dissension at their common border, and all states feared the specter of Chinese-backed Communist insurgency.<sup>1</sup> Acting on mutual wariness and driven by an anxiety over forces beyond their borders, the five founding members crafted an association that would restrain aggression and engender supportive intra-regional relations while preserving each state's full sovereignty and policy independence.

This was achieved through an informal and extraordinarily lightweight organizational structure<sup>2</sup> that did not possess authority separate from its member states but instead relied on their individual political wills for influence.<sup>3</sup> In this way the five states could be sure that their sovereignty, jealously guarded after the trauma of colonialism, was secure. Thus came about the basis for one of the most important of the three norms that define the ASEAN Way: mutual non-interference. In practice, this principle refers not just to military non-intervention but also to refraining from commenting on other member states'

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Antolik, *ASEAN and the Diplomacy of Accommodation* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1990), 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> Pushpa Thambipillai and Jayaratnam Saravanamuttu, *ASEAN Negotiations: Two Insights* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Timo Kivimaki, "Southeast Asia and conflict prevention: Is ASEAN running out of steam?," *Pacific Review* 25, no. 4 (2012): 407, doi:10.1080/09512748.2012.685094.

internal affairs. Such an interpretation of non-interference allows the ASEAN states to shield themselves from criticism regarding the serious domestic challenges each one faces, for the price of maintaining silence on their neighbors' pitfalls. Bangkok's bloody mishandling of its southern insurgency, for example, was left off the agenda of the 2004 ASEAN summit – indeed, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin threatened to walk out if the topic were raised.<sup>4</sup> Issues of human rights abuses or poor governance are rarely discussed; the problem state is allowed to manage, or mismanage, its own affairs away from the spotlight while other member states look the other way.

The second component of the ASEAN Way is the practice of “focusing on things that unite rather than divide.”<sup>5</sup> Given the diversity of the organization's member states and thus the fragility of the grouping itself, ASEAN was designed to minimize conflictual interactions and instead focus on what could be accomplished, prioritizing the socialization process over concrete results. Such an approach aims to maximize ASEAN's long-term effectiveness by engendering good feelings between members, developing a sense of community and encouraging cooperative, friendly relations and personal rapport among the region's national leaderships. Importantly, it is also intended to maintain the association's image of regional solidarity, one of its most powerful tools in its relations with external actors and also one of the most visible manifestations of its continuing success. The converse of this is that “failure to reach a common agreement could be interpreted negatively and cast doubt on the workings of the organization.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, ASEAN tends to put off controversial issues, waiting for them to reach a more manage-

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<sup>4</sup> Steven McCarthy, “Burma and ASEAN: Estranged bedfellows,” *Asian Survey* 48, no. 6 (2008): 923, doi:10.1525/as.2008.48.6.911.

<sup>5</sup> Kivimaki, “Running out of steam,” 406.

<sup>6</sup> Thambipillai and Saravanamuttu, *ASEAN Negotiations*, 14.

able stage or even transform completely before addressing them. Finally, there is the cultural imperative of avoiding public controversy or the public embarrassment of any member state.<sup>7</sup> ASEAN's very founding was a "face-saving and non-contentious instrument of war-termination diplomacy"<sup>8</sup> – it allowed Indonesia and the Philippines to commit to a durable peace with Malaysia without saying as much, downplaying their policy reversals and distracting attention from their very recent aggression. Focusing on things that unite, such as Southeast Asian identity or economic development, is a relatively easy way to preserve the dignity of all parties and present the organization in a desirable light.

Closely related is the principle of negotiation and consensus-building, one of the most central to the functioning of ASEAN. Due to the Southeast Asian states' stress on sovereignty, "ASEAN procedures are designed to protect dissenters"<sup>9</sup> – the organization's decisions must respect all members' points of view, and combine them together rather than eliminate to ensure universal acceptance. No votes are taken; instead, a drawn-out process of negotiation and adjustment takes place as member states search for a common denominator and make the necessary accommodations to reach consensus. This in effect gives all ten members a "soft veto";<sup>10</sup> every state has the power to single-handedly block a motion that does not satisfactorily line up with its own preferences. No member's national imperatives, and thus sovereign autonomy, can be overridden. This style of decision-making derives from the traditional village politics of island Southeast Asia, where the *musyawarah* system, a process of discussion and consultation, "excluded

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>8</sup> Antolik, *Diplomacy of Accommodation*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Simon, "ASEAN stumbles," 50.

<sup>10</sup> Wong, "China hurdle."

the possibility of the majority imposing its views on the minority.”<sup>11</sup> The final resolution, or *mufakat*, is a synthesis of different viewpoints designed to appease everyone in the village. Consensus-building as an ASEAN norm goes all the way back to the organization’s founding, when the group was dominated by the Malay archipelago nations and when colonialism and sovereignty threats loomed large in the minds of Southeast Asians. The passage of time, though, has seen the waning of the Malay states’ preponderance in ASEAN with the incorporation of the mainland nations, and the entrenchment of a long peace in the region that largely precludes immediate military threats. These factors, plus the democratization of many of the older members, have at times encouraged states to push the limits of the ASEAN Way, occasionally flouting principles such as political non-interference, the avoidance of sensitive issues, and others.

Domestic politics in particular seem a powerful motivator for states to violate ASEAN principles. In Malaysia, for example, public pressure to address Thai heavy-handedness in its Muslim Malay South has frequently caused Kuala Lumpur to express criticism towards Bangkok – after the Tak Bai incident of 2004, in which 85 protestors died in Thai military custody, the Malaysian parliament openly debated and then unanimously condemned Thai actions.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Malaysia’s foreign minister even advocated revising ASEAN’s non-intervention principle in the wake of the incident. Issues of humanitarian concern like the Tak Bai incident are common impetuses for such breaches. Myanmar’s arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi in 2003 induced a joint statement from the

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<sup>11</sup> Thambipillai and Saravanamuttu, *ASEAN Negotiations*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> John Funston, “Thailand’s southern fires: The Malaysian factor,” *UNEAC Papers* 26 (2008): 61, <http://www.une.edu.au/asiacentre/PDF/No26.pdf>.

ASEAN foreign ministers calling for her release;<sup>13</sup> its continuing failure to democratize brought censure from the Malaysian, Philippine, and Thai parliaments in 2005 as its scheduled chairmanship of ASEAN approached.<sup>14</sup> The norm of consensus-building has also at times been dis-regarded. While deliberating the accession of Cambodia to the grouping, ASEAN chose to delay its membership and furthermore to “take human rights into consideration when reviewing this decision” over the objections of Vietnam and Malaysia.<sup>15</sup> Already under fire for their decision on Myanmar, ASEAN may have decided that the organization’s credibility was more important. Episodes like these demonstrate that despite general fealty to the ASEAN Way, both individual members and the organization itself have shown a willingness to breach certain of its principles when a more impelling purpose will be served.

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<sup>13</sup> McCarthy, “Estranged bedfellows,” 920.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 923.

<sup>15</sup> Moller, “Cambodia and Burma,” 1098.

## FACTORS OF ASSOCIATIONAL PERFORMANCE

The success of any political entity or grouping is influenced heavily by a handful of factors, prominent among which – and particularly for ASEAN – are cohesion and the decision-making process. Cohesion is especially important in the conduct of external relations: in light of systemic changes and evolving power dynamics, the capacity of a state or organization to respond effectively depends to a great degree on its ability to realize internal cohesiveness.<sup>1</sup> The sources of cohesion fall into three categories: rationality-based, trust-based, and identity-based.<sup>2</sup> Rationality-based cohesion derives from the mutual perception that some manner of reward or desirable common good may be obtained through participation and common action. These include “economic, moral and cultural incentives.”<sup>3</sup> For the ASEAN states, rational motivations may include economic benefits, diplomatic support, leverage against more powerful outside actors, or enhanced legitimacy either domestically or internationally. If member states’ objectives are at odds, however, common action may be unuseful, and thus as a source of cohesion rationality is of limited value for ASEAN.

Trust-based cohesion draws on “good will and shared values,” and is generally reflected in a willingness to put the outcomes of meaningful decisions in others’ hands.<sup>4</sup> Being as much a result of cohesion as it is a cause, though, trust is a relatively weaker

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<sup>1</sup> Hidetaka Yoshimatsu, “ASEAN and evolving power relations in East Asia: Strategies and constraints,” *Contemporary Politics* 18, no. 4 (2012): 402, doi: 10.1080/13569775.2012.728030.

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Cadena-Roa, Matilde Luna, and Cristina Puga, “Associational performance: The influence of cohesion, decision-making, and the environment,” *Voluntas* 23, no. 4 (2012): 999, doi:10.1007/s11266-011-9246-9.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 1000.

source material. Furthermore, ASEAN's heterogeneous membership of democracies and authoritarian states, socialist economies and free markets, Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim majorities, and diverse ethnic makeup is a less than solid foundation for trust-based cohesion, though this is somewhat offset by the long-term working relationships between regional governments. The group's reliance on consensus-building, too, suggests that members may be hesitant to trust each other with important decisions; the veto each state holds ensures that none of them need put their faith in their ASEAN partners to formulate policy.

Identity factors, then, are the primary source of ASEAN cohesion. The root of identity-based cohesiveness is the definition of the group in contrast to others, the perception of an "imagined community" delineated by boundaries that reinforce ingroup and outgroup dynamics.<sup>5</sup> A shared mission or cause enhances this identification; for ASEAN, the cause is the restriction of outside interference in the region, and the boundaries are both geographic (membership is exclusive to the states of Southeast Asia) and size-related (ASEAN is a grouping of small and medium powers only). Associational history is an important component of identity: a strong tradition or long history often serves as "a source of pride and togetherness" that encourages members to act with common purpose and make compromises for the group.<sup>6</sup> In ASEAN, history's effect on cohesiveness is rather contradictory. Five of its members benefit from the bonds engendered over more than forty years of shared experience – to the founding members ASEAN became a "habit of mind," in the words of a former Malaysian foreign minister,<sup>7</sup> and they were more

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 999-1000.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Antolik, *Diplomacy of Accommodation*, 4.

willing to concede to the views of their peers.<sup>8</sup> The newer members, however, are not party to that shared history, and this contributes to the sense that ASEAN has become a two-tiered organization, divided between newer and older members. Thus history has both enriched and impaired identity-driven cohesion.

A final factor that affects cohesiveness is the presence of an external threat. “All other things being equal,” writes Schweller, “the emergence of an outside threat should increase social cohesion”; divisions among the threatened group will be put aside as members unite to defeat the common menace and defend core values or interests.<sup>9</sup> There are two sides to this relationship, however. An external threat can increase cohesion only when “the outside threat is seen as a danger to the group as a whole, not just a part of it” – variations in threat perception can in fact lead to the group’s likely disintegration if some members feel that an external conflict does not concern them.<sup>10</sup> Two other requirements exist: there must be a consensus among members that preservation of the group is worthwhile, and furthermore a “reasonable chance” that the threat can in fact be defeated if the group is united, for cohesiveness to benefit from an outside threat.<sup>11</sup> Otherwise, the pressures of diverging interests and self-preservation, or simple apathy on the part of some members, can exacerbate divisions and weaken cohesion to the point of breaking. Unable to agree on a common course of action, the group will lose efficacy and become vulnerable to its enemies, inviting a slide to irrelevancy or disintegration.

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Cribb, “Burma’s entry into ASEAN: Background and implications,” *Asian Perspective* 22, no. 3 (1998): 57-58, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/59894119?accountid=10141>.

<sup>9</sup> Randall Schweller, “Unanswered threats: A neoclassical realist theory of underbalancing,” *International Security* 29, no. 2 (2004): 176, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4137589>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

An association's decision-making process also has an important effect on its performance. Consensus-building methods such as negotiation and deliberation, while ensuring that "no decision can be taken against the expressed opposition of any participant," are also more likely to produce ambiguous decisions, and even risk non-decisions.<sup>12</sup> This can be seen in ASEAN's tendency to avoid controversial problems, where consensus is unlikely, and in its waffling on important issues like the organization's relationship with Hanoi in the 1990s. Furthermore, since such methods drive towards a mutually-tolerable middle point between members, solutions reached are typically ideal for no party. Internal stability of the association may be preserved, and the equality of all members asserted, but potentially at the cost of an effective solution in terms of the external issue: "compromised solutions...may be acceptable but not always adequate" because they are grounded not in situational realities but in political considerations and bargaining over the proper response.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, deliberation requires that members demonstrate a high level of autonomy.<sup>14</sup> Collective decision-making works best when it is built on discretion and a commitment to appropriate, accurate solutions; member contribution is therefore most valuable when it is not influenced by interest groups with their own agendas. When members are not independent of special interest pressures, from either within or without, efficacy suffers, and group decisions will not reflect the best choice for the association as a whole or its components.

The ASEAN states face a variety of different pressures. In the democracies, domestic constituencies have certain expectations of their policymakers. In every country

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<sup>12</sup> Cadena-Roa, Luna, and Puga, "Associational performance," 12-13.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

segments of the elite exert influence as well – the military, business interests, political families. External pressures exist, too: ties with major outside powers like the United States and China have the potential to affect the negotiating stances of the member states. This does not necessarily hamper the association's efficiency; if the interests of powerful forces in each country align, reaching a decision becomes a rather straightforward issue. However, the decision reached may not be the best solution for the problem at hand, having been decided upon for the wrong reasons and reflecting the wishes of only a select few. Given that the primary function of ASEAN, though, has long been to facilitate communication and social norms in the region, and not to achieve specific concrete objectives, the existence of pressures which limit the policy independence of the ASEAN officials, and the at times low level of cohesion within the organization, have not prevented the organization from continuing to play a central role in Southeast Asian and Asia-Pacific affairs.

## THE CASE OF MYANMAR

In 1992, as a new phase of international politics was taking shape in place of the old Cold War configurations, Bangkok floated a proposal to invite Myanmar's military government as an observer to the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Manila. Concerned over Yangon's treatment of the country's Muslim minority, however, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei opposed the suggestion, and as it turned out Yangon itself was not interested in the Thai proposal.<sup>1</sup> The next few years would see a number of reversals of opinion concerning Burmese participation in ASEAN. In 1993, Myanmar's own leaders "signaled...interest in attending ASEAN events for the first time." In 1994, the country made its ASEAN debut as Thailand's guest at that year's meeting, and Indonesia and Malaysia both expressed support for Myanmar's inclusion in the grouping.<sup>2</sup> 1995 saw Yangon sign on to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and then the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Treaty;<sup>3</sup> by 1996, as Myanmar edged towards full membership, some members were beginning to have doubts about bringing Myanmar into the association so quickly.

An informal foreign ministers meeting in September "failed to reach a consensus on the timing of Rangoon's accession,"<sup>4</sup> although all states agreed that Myanmar should eventually join. In November, Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore voiced objections

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<sup>1</sup> Moller, "Cambodia and Burma," 1089.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1090.

<sup>3</sup> Termsak Chalermpananupap, "ASEAN's policy of enhanced interactions," in *Myanmar/Burma: Inside challenges, outside interests*, ed. Lex Rieffel (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2010), 151-152.

<sup>4</sup> Moller, "Cambodia and Burma," 1091.

to Malaysian and Indonesian insistence on a 1997 accession date. All three cited concerns over Myanmar's economic underdevelopment, and the consequences for the free trade agreement slated for 2003.<sup>5</sup> For Thailand and the Philippines, the group's two democracies, the country's internal politics were clearly a primary concern. The Burmese junta, after raising hopes by releasing opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest in 1995, had launched renewed rounds of repression, arresting hundreds of National League for Democracy members in May and October 1996 and once again barricading Suu Kyi in-side her house. Torture of prisoners and summary executions continued, and millions of Burmese, including children, endured forced labor as military porters or builders on infra-structure projects. A marked improvement in internal conditions, Bangkok and Manila maintained, would be necessary before Myanmar could be allowed to join.

A divided ASEAN faced the decision on Myanmar's accession in 1997. Complicating the issue was the intense pressure applied by the West to postpone Burmese membership until visible progress was made towards democratization. The EU in 1996 had introduced a new sanctions package against Myanmar that froze regime members' overseas assets, put restrictions on their visas, and suspended all aid not humanitarian in aims.<sup>6</sup> The United States barred new American investments in Myanmar in 1997, a move interpreted by many as a bid to "make ASEAN sit up and listen";<sup>7</sup> at the same time Secretary of State Madeleine Albright penned letters to each ASEAN head of government

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1092.

<sup>6</sup> "Overview of Burma sanctions," *BBC*, December 18, 2009, accessed November 4, 2013, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8195956.stm>.

<sup>7</sup> "Grouping put between a rock and a hard place," *Nation*, April 25, 1997, accessed November 9, 2013, [http://www.burmanet.org/bnn\\_archives/1997/bnn0497n703.txt](http://www.burmanet.org/bnn_archives/1997/bnn0497n703.txt).

“urging them to postpone Burma’s admission.”<sup>8</sup> In May Albright indicated that US participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum may be affected if Myanmar’s accession proceeded on schedule.<sup>9</sup>

The West had shown that it was serious about Myanmar; every effort had been taken to punish Yangon for its lack of progress, to discourage ASEAN from engaging the junta, and to threaten censure for continuing down the path to Burmese membership without giving consideration to Myanmar’s internal issues. After ASEAN pressed ahead and welcomed Yangon into its ranks in July 1997, the EU suspended talks on economic cooperation between itself and ASEAN as punishment.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile the junta continued to silence political dissent and violate human rights, to the embarrassment of the rest of ASEAN. The organization’s international reputation was damaged, relations with several of their major dialogue partners were on rocky ground, and furthermore increased attention was drawn to “democratic shortcomings in other ASEAN countries” and the ongoing Indonesian occupation of East Timor.<sup>11</sup> Rather than breaking further apart in the face of this external pressure, though, the ASEAN states came together and pushed forward with their own view on how to deal with Myanmar.

This view was a stark contrast to the Western policy of isolation and sanctions. Termed ‘constructive engagement,’ the approach espoused by ASEAN was grounded in the liberal notion that “by promoting trade, diplomatic, and economic ties with an authoritarian regime, socioeconomic progress and the growth of a middle class would produce

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<sup>8</sup> Cribb, “Burma’s entry,” 54.

<sup>9</sup> Kavi Chongkittavorn, “ASEAN to push back new admission to December,” *Nation*, May 30, 1997, accessed November 8, 2013, [http://www.burmanet.org/bnn\\_archives/1997/bnn0597n737.txt](http://www.burmanet.org/bnn_archives/1997/bnn0597n737.txt).

<sup>10</sup> Cheng Guan Ang, “Myanmar: Time for a unified approach,” *Security Dialogue* 32, no. 4 (2001): 468, doi:10.1177/0967010601032004007.

<sup>11</sup> Cribb, “Burma’s entry,” 51.

political liberalization.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, ASEAN hoped that regular interaction between itself and Yangon would bring about the gradual socialization of the Burmese regime to regional and international norms and encourage better governance and possibly eventual democratization. Constructive engagement was in line with ASEAN’s core principle of non-intervention, and anyways few members were keen on punishing Myanmar for its internal challenges when all had embarrassing problems of their own. Nonetheless, variations on the idea, developed by several ASEAN officials throughout the late 1990s, sometimes blurred the lines of non-intervention. Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim proposed in 1997 a policy of ‘constructive intervention’ that would stress more actively pursuing reform and democratic progress in Myanmar and other new members; Surin Pitsuwan, foreign minister of Thailand, advocated ‘flexible engagement’ to allow ASEAN a wider role in resolving and preventing internal issues with trans-national implications.<sup>13</sup> Neither idea gained traction in the organization, however, and instead in 1998 a new iteration of constructive engagement called ‘enhanced interaction,’ suggested by Indonesia’s Ali Alatas, was broadly accepted, entailing the understanding that “individual member states could comment upon the domestic policies of other members but that ASEAN itself should not.”<sup>14</sup> Comments, additionally, were expected to be discreet and supportive. This slight modification of ASEAN’s approach eased members’ differences on the Myanmar issue after the democracies had conceded on Yangon’s accession date, and helped to further define the policy of ‘constructive engagement’ that ASEAN prescribed for dealing with their pariah neighbor.

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<sup>12</sup> McCarthy, “Estranged bedfellows,” 917.

<sup>13</sup> Chalermphanupap, “Enhanced interactions,” 153-154.

<sup>14</sup> McCarthy, “Estranged bedfellows,” 919.

Constructive engagement was a means to an end for ASEAN, though. Much deeper motivations underlaid the association's decision to admit Yangon in 1997, based on pragmatic economic and political considerations. Thailand, the first state to propound Burmese entry to ASEAN, was also one of Myanmar's top trading partners and leading investors, and hoped that Burmese natural gas reserves might relieve domestic energy demand.<sup>15</sup> The military, a dominating presence in Thai politics, maintained a vested interest in Myanmar's logging, mining, and fishing industries.<sup>16</sup> With the July 1997 accession date approaching, Thai economic interest in Myanmar rose ever higher, even as loud voices at home spoke out against constructive engagement. A coalition of students, activists, and opposition politicians protesting Burmese human rights abuses were unable to force an end to the \$1.2 billion Yadana gas pipeline project from Myanmar to Thailand in 1997.<sup>17</sup> Thai money flowed into hotels, construction projects, and a 'friendship bridge' at the Burmese border.<sup>18</sup> In Indonesia, members of President Suharto's family also had stakes in the Burmese economy. Singapore and Malaysia were major trading partners and investors; and all of ASEAN recognized the country's large market size, cheap labor reservoir, and natural resource wealth.<sup>19</sup> In April 1997, consultations with the junta found that Myanmar was economically and logistically well-prepared to join.<sup>20</sup> By that time ASEAN members accounted for 42% of Myanmar's

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 917.

<sup>16</sup> Moller, "Cambodia and Burma," 1089.

<sup>17</sup> "Lobbyists push premier to shelve Yadana," *Nation*, May 16, 1997, accessed November 9, 2013, [http://www.burmanet.org/bnn\\_archives/1997/bnn0597n723.txt](http://www.burmanet.org/bnn_archives/1997/bnn0597n723.txt).

<sup>18</sup> Thongbai Thongpao, "Stance towards Burma is wrong," *Bangkok Post*, May 4, 1997, accessed November 9, 2013, [http://www.burmanet.org/bnn\\_archives/1997/bnn0597n712.txt](http://www.burmanet.org/bnn_archives/1997/bnn0597n712.txt).

<sup>19</sup> Cribb, "Burma's entry," 56.

<sup>20</sup> Kavi Chongkittavorn, "New twists in an expanding ASEAN," *Nation*, April 25, 1997, accessed November 9, 2013, [http://www.burmanet.org/bnn\\_archives/1997/bnn0497n703.txt](http://www.burmanet.org/bnn_archives/1997/bnn0497n703.txt).

exports, 40% of its imports, and about half of total foreign investment.<sup>21</sup> Bringing Myanmar into ASEAN would further economic integration, grant fellow ASEAN states a comparative advantage in access to the country, its markets, and its resources, and increase economic gains through lower tariffs.

The more urgent logic behind Myanmar's accession, though, was the need to counter growing Chinese influence in Yangon. Since the late 1980s, Beijing had become heavily involved in the construction of new infrastructure in Myanmar, from roads and railways to airports and, most disconcerting for the ASEAN states, naval facilities. Military cooperation between the two was expanding as Beijing and Yangon traded official visits and signed new agreements on weapons sales, training, and intelligence sharing; already China was the Burmese military's primary supplier. Many believed that Chinese intelligence-gathering and even a naval presence in the region was imminent.<sup>22</sup> This prospect was highly distasteful to almost all of ASEAN: four of its seven members, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei, held onto conflicting territorial claims with Beijing in the South China Sea, while Indonesia and Thailand were loath to see Chinese intrusion into the Andaman Sea and Malacca Strait. Furthermore, there was a "general conviction that China was an emerging superpower that could not be relied upon to act according to law and practice in international affairs."<sup>23</sup> This military threat, combined with China's rising economic clout in Myanmar, ensured that "concern over the growing influence of China was uppermost" in the minds of ASEAN officials as they debated Yangon's acces-

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<sup>21</sup> Cribb, "Burma's entry," 56.

<sup>22</sup> Ang, "Unified approach," 474.

<sup>23</sup> Cribb, "Burma's entry," 55.

sion in 1997.<sup>24</sup> Myanmar, they firmly believed, had to be pulled away from the Chinese orbit for the security and independence of the region.

The prospect of economic benefits helped to assuage Thailand's misgivings about Burmese ASEAN membership, and concern over a rising China was justification to a doubtful Philippines. These two factors, which all members could agree upon, provided a solid foundation from which to work towards consensus. One final consideration, which unambiguously united ASEAN sentiment and lent legitimacy to the decision to include Myanmar, was the bearing of certain founding principles on the issue. The first of these was the notion of an all-embracing Southeast Asian community. It had been the intention of ASEAN's founders for the organization to eventually incorporate every nation in Southeast Asia; membership had been offered to both Burma and Cambodia in 1967, but each had declined (Laos and the two Vietnams were deemed not yet ready to join).<sup>25</sup> The result was that ASEAN looked very much like an anti-communist league, and so it was only after the Cold War had ended that the possibility of expanding over the rest of the region became real. Still, Yangon retained a fiercely isolationist streak, a trait which had evolved out of geography and U Nu's neutralist stance in the years after independence, and as late as 1992 expressed a lack of interest in joining the regional grouping. The junta's change of heart in 1993 finally offered a "window of opportunity" for expansion, and ASEAN leaders were eager to take advantage of this window before the country returned to its traditional isolationism.<sup>26</sup> With the accession of Vietnam as its seventh member in 1995, ASEAN was on the way to fulfilling its founders' vision; Lao and Cambodian

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<sup>24</sup> Ang, "Unified approach," 475.

<sup>25</sup> Alice Ba, *(Re)Negotiating East and Southeast Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 57-58.

<sup>26</sup> Cribb, "Burma's entry," 53.

interest in the association fuelled hopes for a completion of the organization's membership by the new millennium, and there was a feeling that "whatever obstacles might exist to integration in 1997, they were fewer than they had been and perhaps fewer than they would be in the future."<sup>27</sup> Burmese entry would seal the aspiration for an ASEAN of all ten Southeast Asian states.

Another principle came to have an even more substantial effect on ASEAN's decision – the still relevant intent of the founders, in 1967, to block outside interference in the region. Along with the institutionalization of peace in Southeast Asia, the rejection of great-power meddling was one of the central motivations for ASEAN's founding. Thus, it was of great importance to the leaders of the association "not to be seen being told what to do by the West."<sup>28</sup> As July 1997 approached, the United States stepped up its opposition to Myanmar's accession: in late April, State Department Spokesman Nicholas Burns asserted that the country "should not be rewarded by membership in one of the most prestigious and important pan-Asian organizations," and told the press that Washington was "trying to use our influence with the ASEAN partners to make the point that Burma should be given a stiff message that it's not welcome."<sup>29</sup> This new assertive and very public stance was likely the tipping point for a still-torn ASEAN. Malaysian Foreign Minister Abdullah Badawi responded the next day that "we understand the issue better than the United States."<sup>30</sup> Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs asserted that any state attempting to block Myanmar's entry into ASEAN through political pressure did the most

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>29</sup> "U.S. press ASEAN not admit Myanmar," *Reuters*, April 26, 1997, accessed November 8, 2013, [http://www.burmanet.org/bnn\\_archives/1997/bnn0497n705.txt](http://www.burmanet.org/bnn_archives/1997/bnn0497n705.txt).

<sup>30</sup> M. Jegathesan, "Malaysia says Burma's entry into ASEAN vital for regional stability," *AFP*, April 27, 1997, accessed November 9, 2013, [http://www.burmanet.org/bnn\\_archives/1997/bnn0497n707.txt](http://www.burmanet.org/bnn_archives/1997/bnn0497n707.txt).

harm to its own image.<sup>31</sup> Most significant, though, was the response of the Philippines, by then the only member state still expressing reservations about Myanmar. Foreign Minister Domingo Siazon on May 1 called US tactics dictatorial and accused Washington of betraying its own democratic principles by failing to respect differences of opinion.<sup>32</sup> While tense deliberation and a continuing lack of consensus within ASEAN persisted up until Myanmar's accession in July, the United States' perceived affront to the organization's freedom to decide its own membership strengthened the hand of those countries already in favor of Myanmar's early accession and at last provided the Philippines, whose economic interests in Myanmar were minimal, a compelling reason to acquiesce to its ASEAN partners on the issue. ASEAN, declared Philippine President Fidel Ramos, "can-not be bullied."<sup>33</sup>

In early July 1997, a violent coup in Phnom Penh offered ASEAN one last chance to change course on Myanmar. The final three members, it had been agreed, would be admitted simultaneously; if Cambodia's accession were deferred due to political instability, Myanmar's could be as well, without giving the appearance of caving to Western pressure. By this time ASEAN was determined, though, to push ahead with Burmese admission, and the momentum of events dictated that this attitude would not change. Instead, Cambodia's entry alone was pushed back while Myanmar and Laos proceeded on schedule – in spite of the fact that, in the eyes of many, it was Yangon's repressive

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<sup>31</sup> "Rangoon admission called vital to bloc," *Bangkok Post*, April 28, 1997, accessed November 9, 2013, [http://www.burmanet.org/bnn\\_archives/1997/bnn0497n707.txt](http://www.burmanet.org/bnn_archives/1997/bnn0497n707.txt).

<sup>32</sup> Mark Baker, "US and Europe accused over sanctions," *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 2, 1997, accessed November 9, 2013, [http://www.burmanet.org/bnn\\_archives/1997/bnn0597n712.txt](http://www.burmanet.org/bnn_archives/1997/bnn0597n712.txt).

<sup>33</sup> Cribb, "Burma's entry," 54.

politics and human rights abuses that were the “real problem” and not Phnom Penh’s troubles.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, Cambodia was not subject to the same driving factors that had motivated Myanmar’s early acceptance into ASEAN. First of all, there was no pressure from the West on the matter; the association had nothing to prove in its decision on Phnom Penh, and so did not feel honor-bound to keep to the scheduled accession date as it had for Yangon. Neither was the Chinese threat as severe as it was in Myanmar – Beijing’s penetration of Cambodia in 1997 was much less complete than it would later become, and was not comparable to the significant influence it already maintained over the Burmese leaders.<sup>35</sup> If anything Bangkok may have feared Vietnam’s influence in the country, since it was Hanoi that had installed the ruling Cambodian People’s Party to power in 1979. CPP leader Hun Sen’s seizure of full power in July from the coalition government likely encouraged Thailand to oppose Phnom Penh’s early admission, if the Thai leadership thought that by doing so it might limit the influence of Vietnam, its traditional rival. And since it was known that the CPP, unlike its ousted coalition partner FUNCINPEC, was keen to join ASEAN as soon as possible, there was little worry that Phnom Penh would frustrate the dream of an ASEAN-10 by reversing course towards isolationism.<sup>36</sup> Finally, Cambodia did not have the economic pull that Myanmar exerted: a much smaller country than Myanmar in terms of both area and population, its GDP in 1997 was also many times smaller than Myanmar’s. Foreign investment totaled just over

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<sup>34</sup> Marisa Chimprabha, “MP backs Cambodia’s ASEAN bid,” *Nation*, May 9, 1997, accessed November 9, 2013, [http://www.burmanet.org/bnn\\_archives/1997/bnn0597n717.txt](http://www.burmanet.org/bnn_archives/1997/bnn0597n717.txt).

<sup>35</sup> Moller, “Cambodia and Burma,” 1096.

<sup>36</sup> Chongkittavorn, “New twists.”

\$150 million,<sup>37</sup> while in Myanmar this figure approached \$900 million.<sup>38</sup> The economic opportunities offered by the latter were significant enough to be a deciding factor; but as far as Cambodia was concerned, the ASEAN states could afford to wait.

The pursuit of rational rewards was plainly one of the bedrocks of ASEAN cohesion in the case of Myanmar. Economic benefits motivated the Thai leadership to back Burmese admission over vocal domestic dissent, and formed a core part of the Indonesian, Malaysian, and Singaporean logic. China's rise and the necessity of limiting its presence in the region comprised the other part of this reasoning, and tapped into Philippine and Vietnamese concerns too. The threat posed by China was uncontroversial to the seven members of ASEAN; all believed that their interests would be served by limiting its ability to extend influence into the region, and that the security and independence of Southeast Asia as a whole required China's relative exclusion. Still, human rights advocates and Muslim groups in even the most determined member states challenged their governments' stances on Burmese membership in ASEAN, painting their views in terms of principle. It was identity-driven factors of cohesion that finally provided a counter-argument to equal the voices of opposition, one similarly grounded in principles and not self-interest. Southeast Asia's right to choose its own course without the imposition of the West's will was the common cause that united ASEAN in defiance; the issue of Myanmar's admission became a showdown between the besieged ingroup and the overreaching outside, with each member ultimately falling in behind the banner of ASEAN community. Cohesion endured, and was perhaps even strengthened by the ordeal – the organization

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<sup>37</sup> "FDI in brief: Cambodia," United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, accessed November 13, 2013, [http://unctad.org/sections/dite\\_fdistat/docs/wid\\_ib\\_kh\\_en.pdf](http://unctad.org/sections/dite_fdistat/docs/wid_ib_kh_en.pdf).

<sup>38</sup> "FDI in brief: Myanmar," United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, accessed November 13, 2013, [http://unctad.org/sections/dite\\_fdistat/docs/wid\\_ib\\_mm\\_en.pdf](http://unctad.org/sections/dite_fdistat/docs/wid_ib_mm_en.pdf).

had made a decision by its own code and then stood by it in the face of intense external pressure.

## THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTES

The 45th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting of July 2012 was notable in that, for the first time in the association's 45-year history, the foreign ministers failed to reach agreement on a concluding joint communique. This failure hinged on just one out of the more than 130 points to be included in the statement<sup>1</sup> – the treatment of the South China Sea territorial disputes between China and the ASEAN claimant states. Earlier in the week, after the Cambodian chair's proposal for the main points of a South China Sea code of conduct was dismissed for “lacking teeth,” and rumors spread that Phnom Penh's foreign minister was in communication with Beijing, the Philippines insisted that any joint statement should make reference to its ongoing naval standoff with China at Scarborough Shoal.<sup>2</sup> Vietnam joined the Philippines in insisting that both countries' territorial disputes with China receive mention in the communique. Cambodia, a close ally of Beijing, was adamant that the disputes would not appear in the statement, and furthermore that they would not be discussed at the meeting in any capacity. Hor Namhong, Cambodia's foreign minister, interrupted an address by Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan to prevent him from bringing up the South China Sea question, and suspicions were aroused when a microphone malfunction coincided with Philippine Foreign Minister Albert del Rosario's comments on the topic.<sup>3</sup> Singapore's Kasiviswanathan Shanmugam opined later that there was “no point in papering over” the problem, adding that “there was a consensus

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<sup>1</sup> Hor Monirath, “Clarification from Cambodia,” *The Japan Times*, August 2, 2012, accessed November 15, 2013, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2012/08/02/reader-mail/clarification-from-cambodia/#.UohjtfmkqFh>.

<sup>2</sup> L. H., “Cambodia's foreign relations: Losing the limelight,” *Economist*, July 17, 2012, accessed November 15, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2012/07/cambodias-foreign-relations>.

<sup>3</sup> Manuel Mogato and Stuart Grudgings, “‘ASEAN Way’ founders in South China Sea storm,” *Reuters*, July 17, 2012, accessed November 16, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/17/us-asean-china-idUSBRE86G09N20120717>.

among the majority of countries”;<sup>4</sup> all of the founding members, along with Vietnam, had agreed that the communique should contain some mention of the disputes. Yet even after eighteen drafts by the Indonesian delegation had been exhausted, there was no consensus, and Phnom Penh refused to concede the point.<sup>5</sup>

The meeting was adjourned without the issuance of a joint communique. Inevitably, much criticism was levelled at Cambodia – it was widely blamed for the failure, with one ASEAN diplomat calling it the “worst chair.”<sup>6</sup> Some suggested that the country had sold its loyalty to Beijing. Cambodia responded that it did not believe ASEAN should take sides, and that, in the words of Phnom Penh’s ambassador to Japan, the Ministerial Meeting “is not a court that can rule against or in favor of anybody in relation to bilateral disputes.”<sup>7</sup> The country denied the influence of China on its behavior, and accused the Philippines and Vietnam of “hijacking” the meeting. ASEAN was thrown into complete disunity, and the group’s failure became a major embarrassment. The future of ASEAN-China negotiations on a code of conduct for the South China Sea was thrown into doubt, and hopes that the organization might play a meaningful part in bringing resolution to the disputes were checked. “How can ASEAN play a central role,” asked Indonesia’s Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa, “if it doesn’t have a common position?”<sup>8</sup>

The debacle at the 45th AMM represented a threat to the most basic objectives of ASEAN. From the start ASEAN’s leaders have been concerned that outside powers

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<sup>4</sup> Erlinda Basilio, “Why there’s no ASEAN joint communique,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, July 19, 2012, accessed November 15, 2013, <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/44771/why-there%E2%80%99s-no-asean-joint-communique>.

<sup>5</sup> Mogato and Grudgings, “‘ASEAN Way’ founders.”

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Hor, “Clarification.”

<sup>8</sup> Mogato and Grudgings, “‘ASEAN Way’ founders.”

would try to take advantage of regional divisions to “project their own agendas onto” Southeast Asia and dominate the region.<sup>9</sup> Phnom Penh, by its actions as chair, allowed China to do just that. Unwilling to face off against a united ASEAN over the South China Sea, Beijing instead used its influence over dependent Cambodia to split the grouping and undermine its ability to handle the disputes. Claimant states were left without the support of the association as they confronted a growing and increasingly assertive Beijing one on one. Not only does this make it easier for China to impose its will on its southern neighbors, it also leaves Vietnam and the Philippines with little alternative but to invite other outside powers, particularly the United States, to play the role of balancer against China. The US in itself has the capacity to dominate the region, and while most of ASEAN is in favor of a strong American presence in Southeast Asia some worry about continued ASEAN centrality in Asia-Pacific regionalism as external powers are asked to play more prominent roles; and there is also the risk that an increased US presence will encourage Chinese belligerence.<sup>10</sup>

As long as it remains disunited, ASEAN runs the risk of becoming irrelevant and handing over initiative to the great powers. Furthermore, if ASEAN cannot deliver support for its member states against extra-regional opponents, it will lose utility to those members. The organization exists to protect the sovereignty and autonomy of Southeast Asia and its individual nations; if these most basic objectives are not met, members have little incentive to continue to participate. At the very least, the perception that some member states have loyalties to external actors which trump their loyalty to the association is

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<sup>9</sup> Ba, “(Re)Negotiating,” 56.

<sup>10</sup> Aileen Baviera, “South China Sea disputes: Why ASEAN must unite,” *East Asia Forum*, July 26, 2012, accessed November 15, 2013, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/07/26/south-china-sea-disputes-why-asean-must-unite/>.

bound to weaken trust and probably lead to even greater division. ASEAN is not a pooled sovereignty – it does not aggregate political authority outside its member states. A reduction of any member’s commitment to the organization, then, necessarily weakens its ability to achieve its goals. On the other hand, a united ASEAN offers its members, all of whom are small or medium powers, a chance to influence regional developments in a way that any single member, on its own, would be unable to. Therein lies the paradox: ASEAN represents the best chance for the nations of Southeast Asia to pursue their interests on their own terms, and yet the unity required to succeed in this endeavor eludes them.

Part of the difficulty is the major rifts that split ASEAN into camps with distinctly different priorities. The first of these rifts is the developmental divide between the new members, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, and the older members, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Brunei. Average per capita GDP among the latter group, on a purchasing power parity basis, was in excess of \$25,000 as of 2012; in the ‘CLMV’ countries, it was under \$3,000.<sup>11</sup> Even excluding the wealthy microstates Singapore and Brunei, the older members are more than three times richer on average than the newer members. Vietnam, the highest-earning of the new members, is on par with the ASEAN-6 in terms of human development and most economic measures, though like the rest of the CLMV it is still undergoing the transition from a state-run to a market-driven economy.<sup>12</sup> Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, however, almost uniformly

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<sup>11</sup> “The World Factbook,” Central Intelligence Agency, last modified November 6, 2013, accessed November 19, 2013, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

<sup>12</sup> Rodolfo Severino, “The ASEAN developmental divide and the Initiative for ASEAN Integration,” *ASEAN Economic Bulletin* 24, no.1 (2007): 38-39, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ase/summary/v024/24.1severino.html>.

lag in foreign direct investment inflows, trade volume,<sup>13</sup> and measures like life expectancy, infant mortality, and adult literacy. All four of the CLMV countries trail in the implementation of information technology.<sup>14</sup> The Initiative for ASEAN Integration, begun in 2000, has sought to target the development gap by putting the resources and experience of the ASEAN-6 and outside donors behind programs for skills training and infrastructure improvement in the CLMV countries, but lack of coordination and “insufficient participation of the CLMV countries in the projects’ design” have hampered progress.<sup>15</sup> ASEAN economic integration remains two-tiered, with newer members still holding back on the tariff reductions older members have already undertaken. Development, for the CLMV states, and for Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar in particular, remains the top priority, even as the founding members have started to move away from developmentalist ideology.<sup>16</sup>

Compounding the divide between old and new members is the loosely overlapping, geostrategic rift between the continental and maritime portions of ASEAN. The rise of China has forced the states of Southeast Asia to look for a balance between the economic opportunities and security risks posed by their giant neighbor, and each country, based on its own unique pressures and priorities, has arrived at a different valuation of these risks and rewards. Very broadly, the imperative to respond to Beijing has split ASEAN into a maritime bloc, which sees grave danger in the expansion of the Chinese navy, and a continental bloc, whose lack of direct interest in the seas limits its perception

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<sup>13</sup> *ASEAN Statistical Yearbook 2012* (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2013): 56, 125, [http://www.asean.org/images/2013/resources/statistics/statistical\\_publication/ASEANStatisticalYearbook2012.pdf](http://www.asean.org/images/2013/resources/statistics/statistical_publication/ASEANStatisticalYearbook2012.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Severino, “Developmental divide,” 38-40.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-41.

<sup>16</sup> Kivimaki, “Running out of steam,” 416.

of a Chinese threat. Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar belong to the latter group, and tend to support China's role in the region. Thailand, too, is a mainland, inwardly-focused state, and maintains closer relations with Beijing than any of ASEAN's other power centers. Largely unthreatened by growing Chinese power, and nurturing a widely pro-Chinese public sentiment,<sup>17</sup> Bangkok has attempted to conduct friendly, cooperative relations with both China and its traditional ally the United States, besides acting as the facilitator of Chinese ties with ASEAN.<sup>18</sup> Vietnam, with its sprawling coastline and shallow interior, is necessarily oriented towards the sea in spite of its mainland geography. Its claims to the Paracel and Spratly Islands have aligned it firmly against an expanding China, alongside fellow claimant the Philippines. Enormous Indonesia, the ballast of both the maritime contingent and ASEAN as a whole, does not dispute ownership of any landforms with Beijing, but Chinese claims over territorial waters in the South China Sea overlap with rich fishing grounds and natural gas fields within the Indonesian exclusive economic zone.<sup>19</sup> Jakarta is wary of Chinese naval power and has accelerated its security ties with India, Japan, the United States, Vietnam, and others in the region as Beijing has become increasingly assertive. Singapore, also a non-claimant, is a major hub of sea-borne trade and has a vested interest in the preservation of freedom of navigation. Kuala Lumpur has attempted to quietly advance Malaysian claims in the sea and promote a

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<sup>17</sup> Sasiwan Chingchit, "After Obama's visit: The US-Thailand alliance and China," *Asia-Pacific Bulletin*, no. 189, East-West Center, Washington, 2012, <http://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/apb189.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> "Chinese expects Thailand to facilitate China-ASEAN ties," *Nation*, September 3, 2013, accessed November 20, 2013, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/national/Chinese-expects-Thailand-to-facilitate-China-Asean-30214025.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Sheldon Simon, "Conflict and diplomacy in the South China Sea: The view from Washington," *Asian Survey* 52, no. 6 (2012): 996-997, doi:10.1525/as.2012.52.6.995.

multilateral approach to the disputes while hesitating to cooperate deeply with Washington or overtly challenge the Chinese position.

Traditionally, ASEAN has operated on the basis of a ‘front-state principle’: on matters which disproportionately affect one or some of the member states, the remainder follow the lead of those states in formulating a response. In 1978, for example, Australia introduced a new civil aviation policy encouraging direct flights to Europe in lieu of stop-overs in Singapore, a move to boost the profits of state carrier Qantas. Singapore, which stood to lose an estimated \$50 million annually, sought and received the full backing of ASEAN in opposing the policy, though other members would be only marginally affected. Faced with a united ASEAN, Canberra was forced to negotiate the issue in dialogue with all of ASEAN, instead of in bilateral talks with Singapore, and subsequently compromised on the new policy.<sup>20</sup> In this case and others, the front-state principle guided the effective management of a regional problem which was viewed differently by the various ASEAN member states. The rest of ASEAN was prepared to accept Australia’s policy were it not for Singapore’s objections;<sup>21</sup> in putting the concerns of the affected state first, though, the organization exhibited a formidable solidarity that helped to achieve an outcome acceptable to all, including Australia.

So why has the front-state principle not been applied in the South China Sea disputes? The continental states have no direct stake in the issue, whereas the claimants themselves view the disputes very seriously. Normal ASEAN procedures, then, should lead to a unified stance behind the claimant states. Chinese economic sway, however, has

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<sup>20</sup> Jiro Okamoto, *Australia’s Foreign Economic Policy and ASEAN* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2010), 119-120, <http://books.google.com/books?id=bqF3yL6CMmUC&printsec=frontcover>.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

proven a powerful countervailing force. According to the 2012 *ASEAN Statistical Yearbook*, China in 2011 was ASEAN's largest trading partner and third-largest source of foreign direct investment (after the EU and Japan).<sup>22</sup> In the CLM countries, China was the largest net investor over the period 2004-2011.<sup>23</sup> In 2011 alone, Chinese investment in Cambodia totaled \$1.2 billion;<sup>24</sup> \$200 million underwrote a new offshore oil-drilling site that began operation in December of that year.<sup>25</sup> In the months running up to the 2012 ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, Chinese President Hu Jintao and then Defense Minister Liang Guanglie each made a four-day trip to Phnom Penh, Hu leaving "with assurance that Cambodia...would endeavor to follow China's preference in dealing with the South China Sea issue at ASEAN gatherings in the coming year."<sup>26</sup> Two months after the AMM failed to issue a joint communique, China extended \$500 million more in soft loans to Cambodia.<sup>27</sup> Beijing's financial support for infrastructure and agricultural development is crucial to Cambodia, which is one of the least developed countries in the region, and Chinese contributions to the country far outstrip those of any other nation. This fact serves as more than enough reason for Phnom Penh not to abide by the front-state principle, and instead actively block the initiatives of the maritime states. The same

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<sup>22</sup> *ASEAN Statistical Yearbook*, 69, 127.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>24</sup> Mogato and Grudgings, "'ASEAN Way' founders."

<sup>25</sup> Nazery Khalid, "Sinking feeling in the South China Sea," *Asia Times*, July 27, 2012, accessed November 15, 2013, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/NG27Ae01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/NG27Ae01.html).

<sup>26</sup> Robert Sutter and Chin-hao Huang, "China-Southeast Asia relations: China muscles opponents on South China Sea," *Comparative Connections* 14, no. 2 (2012): 64, <http://csis.org/files/publication/1202q.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> "Tenth out of ten: A few days at centre stage for Hun Sen, Cambodia's dictator, may not be entirely welcome," *Economist*, November 17, 2012, accessed November 21, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21566658-few-days-centre-stage-hun-sen-cambodias-dictator-may-not-be-entirely-welcome-tenth-out>.

is true of Laos, and to a lesser extent Myanmar. Despite their lack of direct interests in the South China Sea disputes, the stakes are nonetheless high for the CLM countries.

Thai ambivalence on the issue has not helped either. Continental Southeast Asia's center of gravity has avoided taking a definitive stance on the disputes so as not to upset its close economic, diplomatic, and security ties with Beijing. Unlike Cambodia, though, Thailand has upheld the ASEAN Way despite its reservations: at the 45th AMM, Thailand supported the maritime states' position on the South China Sea out of the belief that ASEAN "should speak with one voice."<sup>28</sup> This was a sentiment shared by all five founding members; the newer members, Vietnam excluded, showed no such compunction to preserve the group's unity. This divide may well be a function of the nuances of identity-based cohesion. The common struggles and experiences shared by the original members over near fifty years of association, through the earliest formative years, the Cold War and the wars in Indochina, and the debates over expansion in the 1990s, tie them closely to one another and feed "associational motivation" – commitment to the organization and its goals.<sup>29</sup> The newer members, on the other hand, were outsiders to most of this history, and did not grow with the organization but came to it three decades later, without the bonds and the mutual understanding that were ASEAN's glue. Accordingly, they have not demonstrated a motivation to fulfill their duties as integral parts of ASEAN and adhere as often as possible to its principles.

Is ASEAN's failure to resolve the South China Sea disputes, then, the result of incomplete integration of the CLMV countries into the ASEAN Way of doing things? A frustrated Singaporean MP in August 2012 suggested to Minister Shanmugam during

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<sup>28</sup> Simon, "ASEAN stumbles," 50.

<sup>29</sup> Cadena-Roa, Luna, and Puga, "Associational performance," 999.

parliamentary questioning that “Singapore as one of ASEAN’s original members should step up and guide ASEAN...to ensure that newer ASEAN members understand the importance of putting collective interests of ASEAN above national interests.”<sup>30</sup> An under-secretary of the Philippine Foreign Ministry criticized Cambodia’s inability as chair to forge a consensus among its fellow members;<sup>31</sup> her reproach was echoed by many others. Would ASEAN be better able to confront the issue at hand were its members more committed to upholding the association’s code? The case of Myanmar, in which it withstood intense pressure from the United States and others to admit a global pariah into its ranks, showed that there was power in compromising for the unity of the group. The economic and political influence of the United States was certainly no less than that of China; but ASEAN’s decision to risk its relations with the US, in the end, did not bring enormous consequences for the organization. Its strategic and economic importance and central role in Asia-Pacific regionalism had the effect that Washington chose to sustain its interactions with ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum (though the EU temporarily halted cooperation). A unified stance on the South China Sea might similarly force Beijing to grudgingly swallow ASEAN views, fashioned chiefly by the most affected member states, on the matter.

China’s distinction, however, is the uncertainty it inspires in the members of ASEAN. Whereas the United States in the 1990s was a relatively predictable status quo power, separated from Southeast Asia by thousands of miles of ocean, China is a

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<sup>30</sup> “MFA press release: Transcript for Minister of Foreign Affairs K Shanmugam’s reply to parliamentary questions and supplementary questions, 13 August 2012,” Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed November 15, 2013, [http://www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/overseasmission/asean/press\\_statements\\_speeches/2012/201208/press\\_20120813.html](http://www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/overseasmission/asean/press_statements_speeches/2012/201208/press_20120813.html).

<sup>31</sup> Basilio, “No ASEAN joint communique.”

revisionist, rising power and potential regional hegemon that many do not trust to abide by international law. To the Philippines and Vietnam, along with the rest of ASEAN's maritime bloc to varying extents, China's rise presents a not insignificant threat. The indifference of the continent to this threat is troublesome, because divergent threat perceptions within an organization tend to tear at the grouping's seams.<sup>32</sup> Cohesion can benefit from an external threat when group members feel that the group is worth preserving, and when there is sufficient likelihood that group unity may overcome the threat.<sup>33</sup> Given the possibility that China will sustain its rapid economic growth and continue to strengthen its military power, neither is a bet that the CLM countries are apparently willing to make. The economic benefits to be had in the case of continued Chinese prosperity could easily outweigh the value of preserving ASEAN as an effective organization for those members which are closely linked with China, and indeed may already. On the other hand, the difficulty of balancing against China's asymmetrical advantages would not ease with the passage of time but for a major stumble on Beijing's part. Thus, the newer members, which are anyways less politically invested in ASEAN than are the original five, have little motivation to favor ASEAN over China.

One of the consequences of ASEAN's commitment to non-interference is its lack of enforcement mechanisms. Compliance to ASEAN's principles and policies is entirely voluntary; any other arrangement would necessarily infringe upon the sovereignty of the member states, and violate one of the association's core values. The authority of the ASEAN Way therefore has always been endogenous, because it was perpetuated by the

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<sup>32</sup> Schweller, "Unanswered threats," 178.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

alignment of members' national preferences with its basic principles.<sup>34</sup> The flipside, though, is that ASEAN is incapable of compelling members to abide by the ASEAN Way when their interests do not align with those principles. Cambodia's de facto rejection of the front-state principle and refusal to compromise for consensus expose the weakness of the ASEAN Way: with a high-stakes issue on the table, ASEAN's unity was undermined by a member that chose to put its relations with an external power above its duties to ASEAN. If the association is to remain relevant, changes will be necessary to strengthen its institutional authority and prevent failures like the one at the AMM from recurring so that ASEAN can effectively respond to crises and major regional issues.

Days after the adjournment of 2012's unsuccessful AMM, Indonesia's Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa embarked on a mission of damage control. Thirty-six hours of shuttle diplomacy between the ASEAN capitals secured an agreement on six basic principles regarding the South China Sea, which Cambodia then publicly released. Though the declaration did not make specific mention of the Scarborough Shoal dispute, it employed firm language on the matter, calling for "the full respect of the universally recognized principles of international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)" and "the continued exercise of self-restraint and non-use of force by all parties."<sup>35</sup> Natalegawa's initiative and the statement itself met with unanimous praise from ASEAN governments, and to some extent repaired the damage done by the failure of one week earlier. In the next several months, Natalegawa drafted a

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<sup>34</sup> Kivimaki, "Running out of steam," 408.

<sup>35</sup> "ASEAN's six-point principles on the South China Sea," *Council on Foreign Relations*, July 20, 2012, accessed November 25, 2013, <http://www.cfr.org/asia-and-pacific/aseans-six-point-principles-south-china-sea/p28915>.

‘non-paper,’ based on the Proposed Elements of a Regional Code of Conduct which the foreign ministers had unanimously agreed upon in Phnom Penh, to serve as the basis for a South China Sea code of conduct.

An informal ASEAN foreign ministers meeting in August 2013 pledged the organization would “speak in one voice” as it confronted the South China Sea problem<sup>36</sup> and vowed to collectively “urge China to agree to an expeditious conclusion” of the Code of Conduct for the South China Sea,<sup>37</sup> a position which even Cambodia agreed to. This declaration of unity reaffirmed the association’s newfound accord codified in the joint communique of the July 2013 ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, which contained two paragraphs on the South China Sea conforming mostly to Manila’s preferences on the matter.<sup>38</sup> A combination of factors, including Brunei’s chairmanship, Indonesian resolve, greater Philippine-Vietnamese cooperation, and Cambodia’s desire to repair ties with its ASEAN partners, seems to be responsible for this apparent sea change. Consultations with Beijing on a code of conduct for the South China Sea, though, will thoroughly test the durability of this new unity. In June 2013 Beijing expressed willingness to reengage in consultations on a code of conduct beginning that September, after eleven years of delays and refusals; however, China is more likely to use the talks to try to divide ASEAN and prolong the formulation of a code of conduct, its traditional strategy in the South China Sea, than to genuinely strive for an agreement. Already China “has openly hinted that it is

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<sup>36</sup> “ASEAN vows unity on South China Sea – Thai official,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, August 14, 2013, accessed November 25, 2013, <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/83291/asean-vows-unity-on-south-china-sea-thai-official-2>.

<sup>37</sup> Tarra Quismundo, “‘United ASEAN will try to convince China on sea code of conduct,’” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, August 18, 2013, accessed November 25, 2013, <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/83589/united-asean-will-try-to-convince-china-on-sea-code-of-conduct>.

<sup>38</sup> “ASEAN appears more united on South China Sea issues,” *Nation*, July 6, 2013, accessed November 25, 2013, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/opinion/Asean-appears-more-united-on-South-China-Sea-issue-30209796.html>.

a time-consuming process to draw up such a document”<sup>39</sup>; and Foreign Minister Wang Yi has signaled that China “would use the principle of consensus...to veto any proposal with which it did not agree.”<sup>40</sup> ASEAN still has a chance to lock China into a code of conduct, but its moment of unity will need to be sustained at length, perhaps for several years. Will the association be able to maintain its solidarity and resolve for that long, under different chair countries including Laos and Myanmar? It will be difficult, especially if it does nothing to reign in centrifugal forces and implement a more binding institutional structure. Yet it will have to do so to preserve its centrality in Asia-Pacific regionalism, or the larger powers – the United States, Japan, South Korea, India, and others – will have little reason not to bypass the organization in the management of regional affairs.<sup>41</sup> As Singapore’s Minister Shanmugam put it, “If we cannot address major issues affecting or happening in our region, ASEAN centrality will be seen as a slogan without a substance. Our ability to shape regional developments will diminish.”<sup>42</sup> And once more Southeast Asia will be dominated by outside powers, and ASEAN’s very purpose for existing undermined.

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<sup>39</sup> “ASEAN-China summit draft makes no reference to S. China Sea ‘code,’” *Kyodo News*, September 28, 2013, accessed November 25, 2013, <http://english.kyodonews.jp/news/2013/09/248613.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Carlyle Thayer, “New commitment to a code of conduct in the South China Sea?,” *National Bureau of Asian Research*, October 9, 2013, accessed November 25, 2013, <http://www.nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=360#.UpQUOsSkqFg>.

<sup>41</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, “ASEAN’s failures on the South China Sea,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, July 17, 2012, accessed November 15, 2013, <http://blogs.cfr.org/asia/2012/07/17/aseans-failures-on-the-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>42</sup> “MFA press release,” Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

## **LOOKING FORWARD**

The ASEAN Way served Southeast Asian states well for many decades. Its emphasis on consensus and sovereignty bridged the gaps of trust between young nations jealous of their autonomy, and made possible the growth of a framework for regional communication and understanding. The crawling, understated style of regionalism it produced ensured that members would not get cold feet early on; focusing on issues that united, rather than divided, allowed them to gradually build rapport and enhance cooperation without taking great risks or making major sacrifices. Over time, cooperation deepened, an ASEAN identity began to take shape, and the organization became an operational reality – the Secretariat was established in 1976, and the creation of additional structures and agreements continued through the 1980s. The association succeeded in eliminating state-to-state conflict between members by committing them collectively to the principle of non-interference. In the 1990s, ASEAN's prioritization of economic development and political solidarity led to the final unification of all of Southeast Asia, when Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia were admitted despite their internal shortcomings.

The founders' unique recipe for a Southeast Asian regional project was suited for the challenges of the twentieth century. Now, having realized peace among the nations of the region and united them behind an idea of Southeast Asia, ASEAN must adapt to meet the new demands of a changing world. With external pressures greater than ever, and a membership double what it once was, ASEAN will need to take steps to maintain associ-

ational cohesion. The push for an EU-like integrated economic community will help, if ASEAN is serious about it. Such an arrangement would more fully enmesh members in a singular ASEAN identity, and invest them more deeply in the organization. Greater economic interdependence could also lessen the relative influence of China in some members. Weaning the CLM countries off of Chinese dependency, though, should be more than just an indirect objective for ASEAN. The undue influence of any outside power over one or more member states is threatening to ASEAN autonomy, and the association should work with its partners to encourage and coordinate broad-based aid and investment. The Initiative for ASEAN Integration already performs these functions to some extent, but much could be done to improve the coordination and scope of the project – by working more closely with recipient countries in both planning and execution; by pressing partners for greater engagement and more funding; by expanding sources of investment. Japan, South Korea, and the EU are already major donors, but India and the US, both of which have a strong desire to increase their presence in the region, could do much more to promote growth in the less-developed parts of ASEAN.

As much as accelerated economic ties and multilateral development programs, ASEAN needs a stronger institutional structure with actual binding authority. This will necessarily place limits on independent action by member states, and infringe upon non-interventionist ASEAN notions of sovereignty. It is also the best way to put the grouping on a comparable footing with great powers such as the United States or China. Without the authority to legally bind its members to agreements and resolutions, ASEAN remains simply a loose collection of very different small and medium powers that larger powers may try to divide and exploit, whose influence does not exceed the combined total

influence of its various member states; by aggregating authority at a supranational level, ASEAN would be better able to effectively assert and protect Southeast Asian interests and display a credible, singular presence in Asia-Pacific relations. This will be an important step to take as maintaining ASEAN centrality becomes more and more a primary objective for the organization.

For the region as a whole, an effective and autonomous ASEAN is advantageous because it offers the best chances of maintaining a stable balance between feuding large powers competing for dominance. If ASEAN is to remain the center of Asia-Pacific politics, however, it will have to confront a broad scope of problems, and dispense with its penchant for putting off controversial issues. This means the association will have to offer leadership in areas such as human rights and internal state conflict, both subjects long considered off-limits. But in a world where the importance of human rights is increasingly recognized and supported across the spectrum, ASEAN cannot continue to turn a blind eye. Internal conflicts, too, which threaten stability and can often have transnational effects, demand attention from any serious contender for regional leadership. The casualty of these changes will be ASEAN's cherished sovereigntist norms; but these norms reflect a Way whose time has now passed.

The ongoing democratization process in Myanmar has had important geostrategic consequences, as Beijing has watched Yangon slowly slip out of its grasp; it has also illustrated the need for ASEAN to reevaluate its guiding principles. When Myanmar was admitted into ASEAN, it was under the auspices of 'constructive engagement,' a process that was supposed to encourage political reform and opening through contact and government-to-government socialization. In the end, though, it was the imperative to escape

Western sanctions, and the resultant poverty and dependence on China, that brought about change in the country. Now a change must come about in ASEAN. Old principles of sovereignty and non-interference stand in the way of greater efficacy. The prioritization of easy issues over divisive ones hinders continued relevance. Other elements of the ASEAN Way – consensus-building and the protection of minority views, the process-driven construction of a Southeast Asian identity – are valuable for their cultural resonance and their contribution to group cohesion. ASEAN has many of the ingredients it will need to play the role it envisions for itself in the future of the Asia-Pacific region. But the challenges it now faces are very different from those it faced in its early years, and require a reconfiguration of the approach set out by the founders. Building an association with cohesive force equal to the demands of a new era will be difficult, but possible. First, though, ASEAN must recognize that the world has changed, and choose to change with it.

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