ASEAN 2030: 
Challenges of Building a Mature Political and Security Community

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Abstract: This paper examines ASEAN’s political and security challenges and prospects in the coming two decades. To simplify what is a hugely complex and wide-ranging set of issues, I divide the security challenges facing ASEAN into six broad categories. These include (1) the shifting balance of power in the Asia Pacific region, triggered mainly, if not exclusively, by the dramatic rise of China, (2) the persistence of intra-ASEAN territorial conflicts, (3) the territorial dispute in the South China Sea which is a critical factor in China-ASEAN relations, the programs of military modernizations undertaken by ASEAN states and the resulting prospects for an intra-ASEAN arms race, uncertainty and strife caused by demands for domestic political change, and the dangers posed by transnational (non-traditional) security threats. I argue that ASEAN faces major hurdles in realizing a mature political-security community, where intra-ASEAN tensions are significantly managed and reduced to the point where war becomes “unthinkable” and a deep and genuine sense of regional community emerges. While recent steps undertaken by ASEAN are bold and far-reaching, realizing them would depend on several factors, especially the maintenance of its unity and cohesion in face of a rising China, ability to resolve regional disputes, complying with the provisions and instruments of the ASEAN Charter and the Political-Security Community Blueprint, and ensuring an agenda-setting and managerial role in the wider East Asian and Asia-Pacific multilateralism.

A durable regional grouping in the developing world, ASEAN has been a force for stability and cooperation in Southeast Asia and Asia for the past four and half decades. Since 1997, spurred by widespread criticism of its performance in responding to the economic and political challenges presented by the Asian financial crisis, ASEAN has taken a number of key initiatives to revitalize and strengthen itself. It has clarified its vision and consolidated its agenda by launching three ‘communities’: economic, political-security and socio-cultural. It has adopted a Charter, thereby giving itself a legal personality and paving the way for greater institutionalization and consolidation of its agreements and mechanisms of cooperation. As part of these efforts, ASEAN has instituted new instruments of conflict management and collective action. Moreover, whereas ASEAN in the first two decades of its existence focused on a limited range of issues, its mandate has expanded rapidly and may well continue to do so for the next two decades. It functions now cover a range of new transnational or non-traditional security issues, such as climate change, disaster management, counter-terrorism, pandemics, food security, drug trafficking, people smuggling, and many other issue areas. At the same time, ASEAN has also extended its institutional model within the wider Asia Pacific and East Asia regions by anchoring new regional institutions like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three (APT) and the East Asian Summit (EAS). As ASEAN’s Secretary-General, Surin
Pitsuwan, has recently observed, “ASEAN has emerged as the fulcrum of geopolitical stability in Asia.”

With an ambitious vision, expanded agenda, and enhanced instruments of cooperation, ASEAN may seem well prepared to cope with the challenges it faces in the two coming decades. But can we take its longevity and effectiveness for granted?

This paper examines this question with particular respect to the political-security challenges facing ASEAN. For analytical convenience, I divide the principal security challenges facing ASEAN into six broad categories, although these are not mutually exclusive and not presented here in any particular order of importance. These categories are: power shift, intra-ASEAN disputes and tensions, the South China Sea dispute, prospects for an intra-ASEAN arms race, domestic instability and transnational (non-traditional) security threats. Below, I provide a brief description of each.

**Power Shift**

The first is the ongoing power shift in the region, triggered mainly by the rise of China and to a lesser extent, of India. When ASEAN was formed, the global power structure was bipolar. Today, the US, China, India, Japan and a resurgent Russia constitute the basis of a multipolar regional international system.

What are the implications for Asia’s security and ASEAN’s future? We cannot have a definite answer to this question, and this uncertainty itself is part of the security challenge facing ASEAN today, because ASEAN never had to deal with genuine strategic multipolarity before. Indeed, there had never been a multipolar structure of indigenous powers in Asia’s past. The last time the region brought together a multitude of great powers, between the 17th to early 20th centuries, they were mainly outside ones (with the limited exception of Japan after the Meiji reforms). This was when Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Spain, along with the relatively latecomer United States, were scrambling for territory, profit and influence. This led to the impoverishment and subjugation of Asia for over three hundred years, including the marginalization of its two major classical civilizations, China and India.

In Asia’s geopolitical past, the periods of ascendancy of Japan and China never really coincided. The post-Meiji reform Japanese ascendancy coincided with the precipitous decline of Qing China. The same cannot be said of the situation today, because while Japan has been overtaken by China as the world’s second largest and Asia’s leading economy (in PPP terms), it would be misleading to compare Japan today with Qing China in the late 19th century. And while China and India have shared *time* as great powers (the Moghul and the early Qing periods did coincide, but the Gupta empire from 320 AD to 500 AD and the Tang empire from 618 AD to 907 AD did not), they have not shared the same geopolitical *space*. In the pre-globalization era, the mountains dividing India and China might have deterred Chinese rulers if they ever thought of expanding their territory beyond Tibet more than Chinese pilgrims seeking wisdom in India.

How different is the situation today! Asia today has three indigenous great powers, two of them rising simultaneously, with Japan still a significant power notwithstanding its recent troubles. They are joined by two outside powers, the US and Russia. Globalization, modern military technology, and the transport revolution, have brought these powers to a state of much closer and

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more continuous state of interaction than had even been the case in the past. Among the big five, none can ignore none other, mired as they are in a deep state of strategic interdependence.

Some Western theorists of international relations see Asia’s emerging multipolarity as a dangerous development, especially compared to Cold War bipolarity. One strand of theory, neorealism, argues that multipolar systems tend to be more prone to war than bipolar systems. Having only two main actors holding each other in check allows for simpler and more predictable pattern of alliances and interactions, whereas a multipolar environment would be more complex and chaotic. They contrast Europe’s 19th and early 20th century multipolarity – a highly unstable period culminating in two world wars – with the ‘long peace’ of the post-World War II bipolar era. From this perspective, Asia’s emerging multipolarity might mean Europe’s past could be Asia’s future. Others, especially liberal and constructivist theorists, do not see any necessary correlation between bipolarity and conflict, and some even argue that multipolar interactions can induce stability by creating more opportunities for alignments and interactions. After all, rising power with aggressive intentions would have to contend with more than one potentially countervailing power.

This debate remains unsettled to date, but has implications for ASEAN’s long-term future. ASEAN was to some extent the product of a bipolar era, with the US and the USSR shaping the regional balance of power through their forward military presence and alignments (US with Japan, South Korea, Thailand and the Philippines, Republic of China, Australia and New Zealand, the USSR Communist China before the Sino-Soviet split, Vietnam, and India). Moreover, ASEAN emerged at a time when the three indigenous Asian powers, Japan, China and India were all unwilling or unable to assume serious regional leadership. India had lost influence in Southeast Asia following the 1962 defeat in the hand of China, and was otherwise distracted by domestic problems and its rivalry with Pakistan. Mao’s China was mired in its Cultural Revolution, and was viewed with intense suspicion by its neighbours because of its support (till the late 1970s) for communist insurgencies in Southeast Asia. Japan, although remerging by the 1960s from its World War II defeat with an increasingly powerful economy, was not seen as an acceptable regional leader due to persisting memories over its wartime role, as well as fears over its economic dominance. Realising this, Japanese governments abstained themselves from seeking or taking on any major independent regional political role.

Such a situation gave ASEAN a double opening. First, the Cold War stalemate between the US and the USSR gave ASEAN a margin of freedom to pursue its own economic and security goals (which included a relatively non-aligned posture through its Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality framework) without being molested by superpower intervention. At the same time, the predicaments of China, India and Japan gave ASEAN the space to develop its own brand of regionalism, the ASEAN Way, without being overshadowed by the traditional Asian great powers.

While the rise of China and India and the gradual erosion of anti-Japanese sentiments in Southeast Asia (although not necessarily in China and Korea) do not automatically translate into a capacity for them, either individually or collectively, to lead regional institutions, it does give them a much greater ability to shape regional order. It narrows ASEAN’s margin of autonomy and challenges its capacity to ‘lead’ Asian regional institutions. Some Southeast Asians wonder whether the re-emergence of China and India will return Southeast Asia to its historical predicament as an appendage of the two historically important civilizations and marginalize it politically and economically. Moreover, with five great powers engaged in the competition and balancing, ASEAN might find itself facing difficult dilemmas in deciding and coordinating how to engage them individually and collectively over different issue areas.

Another future for ASEAN – equally unpromising one at that – would be a coming together of the great power into some sort of a Concert, akin to the European Concert of Powers established after the Napoleonic wars in the 19th century. Such a concert, a subset of which could be a Sino-US condominium, would entail their joint management of regional political and security affairs, aside from economic dominance. As a well-known saying in Southeast Asia goes, “when the elephants

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fight, the grass suffers, when the elephants make love, the grass also suffers.” An Asian concert of powers involving China, US, Japan and India would marginalise the weak, as the European Concert did in the 19th century. That would make ASEAN centrality and leadership a thing of the past.

These developments need not doom ASEAN, but they will severely test its political maturity and foresight. Coping with the global and regional power shift would require a measure of cohesion and purpose in dealing with the great powers of the region that, as I shall discuss in the conclusion, would determine whether ASEAN 2030 retains its centrality or sinks into irrelevance.

**Intra-ASEAN Disputes and Tensions**

Indeed, resisting marginalization in a multipolar environment would be impossible for ASEAN unless it holds together as a group. This leads to the second major challenge facing the organization: intra-ASEAN tensions and disputes.

ASEAN’s single greatest success as a regional body, a central basis of its claim to be a ‘nascent security community’⁴, was its ability to dilute and manage, if not entirely resolve intramural disputes. This success was evident from the very birth of ASEAN, which consummated the political settlement, mediated by Thailand, of the Indonesia-Malaysia/Singapore conflict (Konfrontasi) triggered by President Sukarno’s refusal to accept the legitimacy of the British-created Malaysian federation. ASEAN in its early years was severely challenged by the Philippine-Malaysia dispute over Sabah, but the conflict paradoxically led the founding members of ASEAN to realize the importance of regional cooperation and the pacific settlement of disputes. Over the years, ASEAN members have not allowed their bilateral territorial disputes and political tensions, including those over maritime boundaries in the Gulf of Thailand, South China Sea, the Sulu Seas and other areas, to cripple the organization. The Singapore-Malaysia dispute over Pedra Branca islands in the South China Sea and the Malaysia-Indonesia dispute over the Sipadan and Ligitan Islands in the Sulawesi Sea have been settled through resort to arbitration by the International Court of Justice. Though the ICJ is an ‘outside’ body, their very willingness to resort to judicial settlement than to violence is a testimony to the spirit of accommodation among ASEAN members.

Added to this is ASEAN’s role in the Cambodian conflict. Although not an intra-ASEAN conflict (neither Vietnam nor Cambodia was a member of ASEAN then), the conflict took up a considerable amount of time and effort by ASEAN as it sought a negotiated settlement while organizing international support against the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. This was a role that was all the more important during the early stages of the conflict, when the Western players such as Australia, France, were absent from the scene, although this would not prevent them from claiming maximum credit for themselves for the eventual settlement of the conflict through the misleadingly named “Paris Peace Agreement”. It is a small exaggeration to say that the real

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⁴ Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 2nd edition (Oxford and London: Routledge, 2009). The distinction between nascent and mature refers to different stages in the evolution of security communities, according to security community theory. Simply put, in a nascent phase, a security community might still retain some sense of rivalry and competition among its members, although this would be muted by converging threat perceptions, expected trade benefits, an evolving common identity and organisational emulation (learning from the experience of other multilateral organisations). At the mature stage, a security community is marked by greater institutionalisation, some degree of supranationalism, a high degree of trust, and low or no probability of military conflicts. Members of a mature security community observe self-restraint and expect no military threats from each other. Beyond this, their relationship might further evolve into that of a ‘mutual aid society’ providing for collective and cooperative efforts to help each other and offer joint solutions to common problems, and finally into a ‘post-sovereign system’, which might include common national institutions as well as supranational and transnational institutions, and some form of collective security. Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, *A Framework for the Study of Security Communities*, in Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (eds), *Security Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 30.
groundwork for the settlement had been laid in Bogor and Jakarta, rather than in Canberra and Paris.

But inter-state disputes and tensions within ASEAN have not disappeared. Neither has war become “unthinkable” - the hallmark of a “mature” security community. ASEAN’s Secretary-General has warned that “unresolved and overlapping maritime and territorial claims remain ASEAN’s biggest challenge.”

But the land boundary dispute between Thailand and Cambodia is also important, as it has already produced military clashes and seriously challenges ASEAN’s claim to be a security community, a grouping of states that have developed ‘long-term expectations of peaceful change’ and ruled out the use of force in settling their disputes. The Thai-Cambodia conflict is a reminder that domestic politics can become a source of intra-ASEAN discord (as with Thailand’s Yellow Shirt-Red Shirt rivalry, which led to the hardening of the Thai position on Preah Viehar), and that new ASEAN members may not always play by the established norms of ASEAN (Cambodia’s sheltering of fugitive Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinwatra, which went against the spirit of non-interference).

The news is not all bad, however. Singapore-Malaysia relations have steadily improved since the end of Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew premierships respectively, witness the recent resolution of their 20-year old railway land dispute. Indonesia and Singapore also enjoy a better political relationship than the days when Indonesian President Habibie disparaged the city-state as a ‘little red dot’. But a variety of bilateral issues between Singapore and its neighbours remain to be settled. With Malaysia, they include, among others, Singapore’s access to Malaysian water and, more trivially, alleged violations of Malaysian airspace by Singapore’s air force planes. Moreover, the bilateral tensions are not strictly inter-governmental, but also inter-societal. Despite Singapore’s increasing turn to ASEAN, it is still regarded by some of its neighbours as somewhat self-centered.

The historical perception in Malaysia and Indonesia of Singapore as a wealthy Chinese island in a ‘sea of Malays’, is a latent source of tension, and might resurface in a future economic crisis in which Singapore is perceived to be unwilling to provide unconditional aid to its neighbours (as Malaysia has during the 1997 economic crisis). While Singapore and Indonesia have now reached agreement on their western maritime boundary, and talks are well under way to settle the eastern boundary, there have been tensions over extradition (Indonesians feel that its corrupt businessmen find it easy to flee to or via the city state rather than face justice at home). The pacifying effect of the ICJ mandated settlement of the Sipadan-Ligitan island dispute has been marred by a new dispute between the two countries over Malaysian claim to the nearby Ambalat. And the Pedra Branca dispute might still surface as a source of Singapore-Malaysia friction, because the ICJ settlement recognized Singapore’s sovereignty over Pedra Branca itself, but awarded the adjacent Middle Rocks to Malaysia.

The South China Sea Dispute

Nonetheless, most of these intra-ASEAN tensions are likely to be low-intensity and should not cause severe disruption of economic development or regional stability. For the next 20 years, the South China Sea conflict will probably remain the ‘worst-case’ threat to peace and security in the ASEAN region, and possibly the most serious challenge to ASEAN’s regional conflict management role.

In 2001, a Rand Corporation assessment identified two types of “conventional military threats” from China to Southeast Asia “that would require a U.S. diplomatic or military response”. Under the first, “[a]n aggressive and hegemonic China could threaten freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, perhaps to coerce the United States, Japan, or the ASEAN states into accepting Chinese political demands”. The second would involve:

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5 Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia.*
7 It is useful to remind ourselves that the Thai-Cambodia dispute over Preah Viehar was not ‘settled’ by the ICJ ruling in 1962.
an attempt by China to forcibly establish and maintain physical control over all or most of
the Spratly Islands, prompting requests for military assistance from one or more of the
ASEAN countries. Such a Chinese operation could feature the threat or use of force against
the territory of an ASEAN state, either to compel acceptance of Chinese demands or to
defeat opposing military forces; alternatively, China could expand its “salami tactics” to
assert control over more territory. ⁸

But that study did note constraints on Chinese power projection capability as well as the political
and economic costs of conflict as factors discouraging China from launching a major attack in the
South China Sea area. Instead, it posited that the “ASEAN countries are likely to face a continuation
of China’s creeping irredentism.”⁹ But ten years later, with its growing naval capabilities (including
“area denial” capability) and increasing “assertiveness”, fears are growing in ASEAN about Chinese
intentions in the South China Sea. Those ASEAN members concerned about China’s military build-up
are likely to be further alarmed by a statement by the Commander of the US Pacific Command,
Admiral Robert Willard, that: “China's rapid and comprehensive transformation of its armed
forces...challenge our freedom of action in the region,” and “potentially infringe on their (US allies')
freedom of action”. ¹⁰ An outright Chinese Monroe Doctrine over South China Sea is unlikely,
however, partly because China has to consider the severe economic consequences of a military
takeover of the South China Sea to deny it to the US and others. Over 60 per cent of China’s GDP
now depends on foreign trade, while imported oil accounts for 50 per cent of its oil needs. Hence:

China’s commerce and hence prosperity depends very much on access to sea lanes through
the Indian Ocean, the Malacca Straits and other areas over which it has little control, and
which are dominated by US naval power. India too has significant naval power in the Indian
Ocean... So if push comes to shove, an aggressive Chinese denial of South China Sea trade
routes to world powers, and the disruption of maritime traffic the resulting conflict might
cause, would be immensely self-injurious to China. It would provoke countermeasures that
will put in peril China’s own access to the critical sealeans in the Indian Ocean and
elsewhere... Chinese leaders are not oblivious to this fact of life. The truth is that they may
not have the option of pursuing an aggressive posture. The costs will simply be too high. ¹¹

This does not, however, warrant complacency on the part of ASEAN. The question facing ASEAN now
is whether it can replicate its earlier record in conflict management in the Cambodia conflict of the
1980s in the case of the larger South China Sea dispute. Like the Cambodia conflict of the 1980s, the
South China Sea dispute’s is not an intra-ASEAN dispute. But the similarity between the two conflicts
ends there. Unlike Soviet-dependent Vietnam in the 1980s, China, the main non-ASEAN party to the
dispute, is an emerging superpower. While the Cambodia conflict was mainly a political/ideological
matter, the South China Sea conflict revolves around issue of territorial claim and sovereignty,
underpinned by the lure of (as yet unproven) natural resources, especially oil and gas that China so
critically needs. Another key difference is that not all ASEAN members are claimants in the dispute, but
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⁸ Richard Sokolsky, Angel Rabasa, C. Richard Neu, The Role of Southeast Asia in U.S. Strategy Toward China
(Santa Monica, The Rand Corporation, 2001), pp.15-16.
⁹ ibid., p.28.
The South China Sea conflict holds important lessons for ASEAN’s future approach to conflict management. With the resolution of the Cambodia conflict in 1991, it was widely seen as the “next Cambodia” for ASEAN. But it almost disappeared from the radar except a brief escalation over the “Mischief Reef Incident” in 1995, even years before the Declaration on Code of Conduct in South China Sea that ASEAN and China signed in November 2002. This was partly due to the Indonesian-led track two workshops on “Managing Potential Conflicts in the South China Sea”, which ran through the 1990s. But the real reason might have to do with the fact that this was a time when China needed time for focusing on its economic development and coping with the Taiwan conflict that had reached a boiling point over the then Taiwanese ruling party’s quest for independent statehood. Now, with the Taiwan conflict somewhat muted and China having already accumulated substantially enhanced economic and military power, the South China Sea issue has resurfaced with renewed vigour. This is an uncomfortable reminder that ASEAN’s traditional practice “sweeping conflicts under the carpet” does not always work. China in particular is too big a player to be swept under the ASEAN carpet. That approach works as long as the political relations among the parties remain good, as was the case with the heydays of China’s “charm offensive” in Southeast Asia in the 2000s. But it is no substitute for more long-term and definitive mechanisms for conflict resolution.

An Arms Race?

Some analysts warn that there is a growing arms race in East Asia, including Southeast Asia. According to estimates by the Stockholm Peace Research Institute, defence spending by the ASEAN countries (excluding Myanmar for which reliable data is not available) has roughly doubled in the past decade (2000-2010) (see Table 1). Moreover, the ASEAN region has also seen a “dramatic increase” in arms imports. Between 2005 and 2009, Malaysia’s arms imports jumped 722 percent, Singapore’s 146 percent and Indonesia’s 84 percent. Singapore ranks among the top ten arms importers in the world. This has prompted an expert from SIPRI, Siemon Wezeman, to warn that “The current wave of South East Asian acquisitions could destabilise the region, jeopardising decades of peace”.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country/Year</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brunei</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>191 (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>1,829</td>
<td>2,025 (for 2001)</td>
<td>6,009</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Laos | N.A. | 24.8 | 18.4 (2009)
Malaysia | 1,495 | 2,020 | 3,259
Myanmar | 2,020 | 3,259 |
Philippines | 1,060 | 1,215 | 1,486
Singapore | 3,038 | 5,855 | 7,651
Thailand | 3,304 | 2,638 | 4,336
Vietnam | 1,565 | N.A. | 2,410

Note: For Myanmar, constant dollar figures are not available. Measured in terms of its local currency (Kyat) current figures, Myanmar’s defence spending was 5.4 billion Kyat for 1990 and 63.45 billion Kyat for 2000. SIPRI does not provide data for 2010.
Source: SIPRI Yearbook, various years. Available at: http://milexdata.sipri.org/

Most projections suggest that defence spending in East Asia, including Southeast Asia, will continue to grow rapidly into the next two decades. In June 2011, Singapore’s defence minister projected a 60-70 per cent increase in defence spending in Southeast Asia and East Asia compared to the last decade. But much of the increases in defense spending and arms purchases will be driven by the bigger players, China, India and Japan, rather than Southeast Asia. Historically, defence spending and arms imports in Southeast Asia have been determined by a variety of factors, of which intra-ASEAN disputes and tensions (e.g. Singapore-Malaysia, and Thailand-Myanmar) is only one part. The other factors include domestic insurgencies, concern for the security and safety of sealanes from disruption from piracy and terrorism (which are common security concerns of ASEAN members), and of course extra-regional security challenges such as uncertainty over China’s strategic intentions or fear of retrenchment of the US military presence in the reason. The last factor is important, since Southeast Asia is part of the wider East Asian strategic theatre, hence affected by what goes on in the relationship among the major players. This serves as an impetus for defence spending and arms purchases, but it need not destabilize intra-ASEAN relations per se. This distinction intra-ASEAN and extra-ASEAN contexts is important to bear in mind when considering the economic and strategic implications of the perceived “arms race” in East and Southeast Asia. The largest ASEAN member in terms of population and GDP, Indonesia, is only the sixth highest defence spender in ASEAN, while the smallest ASEAN member, Singapore, is the highest spender with the most capable armed forces. This causes a state of “balanced strategic disparity” that has served intra-ASEAN stability well in the past and should continue to serve it well into the future. Finally, defence spending in ASEAN has historically been highly sensitive to the economic cycle (unlike South Asia, where defense spending is driven mainly by strategic consideration whether the economies perform well or not). This is a hopeful sign for ASEAN that indicates that its members will not put guns before butter.

Internal Conflicts and Political Change

Southeast Asia was the scene of some of the worst domestic violence of the late 20th century. The Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia killed about 1.7 million (a quarter of the Cambodian population) during its brutal rule between 1975 and 1979. Anti-Communist riots in Indonesia which accompanied the transition from President Sukarno to Suharto, claimed about 400,000 lives. Ethnic and separatist

15 “RI’s defense spending ranks low in SE Asia,” Available at:
http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2010/12/01/r1%E2%80%99s-defense-spending-ranks-low-se-asia.html. The phrase ‘balanced strategic disparity’ is borrowed from Don Emmerson’s term ‘balanced disparity’ in ASEAN, which implies that the largest member states in terms of size and population are not the strongest economic and military powers, while the weaker members in terms of size and population are wealthier and stronger military powers.
movement in East Timor and Aceh claimed 200,000 and more than 2000 lives respectively. While there are no proper collated figures for ethnic separatism in Myanmar - usually low-scale, random casualties and conflicts, 600,000 “internally-displaced persons” from these conflicts have been recorded. According to one estimate, Myanmar, which was embroiled in 6 different intrastate conflicts, is the world’s most conflict-prone country during the 1946-2003 period, having experienced 232 ‘conflict-years’. Other conflict-prone countries during this period, in terms of having experienced the greatest number of conflict-years, are Philippines (86 conflict-years), Indonesia (40 conflict-years), Cambodia (36 conflict-years), Republic of Vietnam (36 conflict-years), and Thailand (35 conflict-years). Although Southeast Asia has witnessed a decline in battle-deaths in keeping with the overall trend around the world, and has been free of major conflict since the fighting in Cambodia (1979-91) ended, internal conflicts in Southern Thailand, Southern Philippines, and Myanmar remain a serious challenge to human security. Military rule, which accounted for some of the worst human rights violations in the region, continues in Myanmar, briefly recurred in Thailand in 2006 and cannot be entirely ruled out in the Philippines.

The main sources of internal conflicts in ASEAN include (1) the lack of fit between the territorial boundaries of the modern ‘nation-states’ and the ethnic composition of their populations (the members of the same ethnic group straddling national boundaries and individual nation-states containing many different ethnic groups); and (2) struggle for regime survival and demands for political change against authoritarian regimes. While one might consider terrorism as a domestic security threat, because it is sometimes rooted in ongoing domestic conflicts, I would include it in the category of transnational threats, given that the major terrorist organizations tend to draw support from and operate across national boundaries, and retain significant external or extra-regional links (e.g. Al-Qaeda and the Jemmah Islamiah network in Southeast Asia).

Domestic conflicts not only challenge the internal stability of ASEAN states, but also regional stability as a whole. Many domestic conflicts tend to spill over national boundaries, especially when militants or refugees flee the conflict zone and seek asylum in neighbouring states (as happened in the past when members of the Communist Party of Malaya moved across the border into Thailand, and may be happening now with the reported movement of Muslim radicals from Thailand’s south coming over to Malaysia). Although it seems to happen rarely these days, such spillovers could become a source of friction between ASEAN member states. Moreover, uneven democratization in ASEAN may see some newly democratic regimes (such as Indonesia), unable to resist domestic demands for sympathy and support for opposition figures in neighbouring authoritarian state, which might be construed as unwarranted interference by the latter.

The past decade has seen the end of several long-standing separatist movements in ASEAN, particularly Aceh and East Timor, although the ending of these conflicts did not come at a significant human and developmental cost. But the separatist movements in the southern Philippines and southern Thailand have no immediate end in sight, and may well continue into the next two decades (It remains to be seen whether the new Thai government’s election campaign pledge to give autonomy to the southern provinces will make any difference; as this will be resisted by the armed forces and autonomy has not ended the southern Philippine conflict). Myanmar too is likely to see periodic flare-up of its myriad ethnic rebellions, as happened in 2009 and 2010.

Table 2. Freedom and Democracy in ASEAN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country \ Year</th>
<th>1972</th>
<th>1988-1989</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freedom Status</td>
<td>Freedom Status</td>
<td>Electoral Democracy</td>
<td>Freedom Status</td>
</tr>
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</table>

18 It is possible for a country to be involved in two or more state-based armed conflicts in a given year and thus accumulate more than one conflict-year for each calendar year. Myanmar for example was embroiled in 6 different intrastate conflicts.
ASEAN remains an odd mixture of authoritarian, semi-authoritarian and democratic regimes. Democratisation in ASEAN has proven to be an uneven and nonlinear phenomenon. Since 1986, democratic transitions have theoretically occurred in four ASEAN members, namely, Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia. But democratic rule in Thailand was briefly but significantly reversed in 2006, and it remains fragile there as well as in Philippines and Cambodia. Notwithstanding its recent elections, Myanmar’s transition to a stable polity with a modicum of democracy remains far from certain.

According to Freedom House data, only one out of ten ASEAN members is regarded as “free”, five are considered “partly free” and the rest “not free”. Using Freedom House’s strict criteria, which counts not just elections but also civil liberties, only two out of ten are “electoral democracies”. (see Table 2). Further democratization in ASEAN is certainly possible in the next two decades. Malaysia and Singapore, traditionally regarded as a mixture of democracy and authoritarianism (‘soft authoritarianism’) are already facing increasing demands for greater political liberalization and openness. If the last elections are any indication, there is a growing sense of political openness in Singapore, once regarded by Western observers as the paradigmatic case of a authoritarian-developmentalist (albeit a successful one) state, whose former prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, once associated democracy with indiscipline and hence a barrier to development. This view has now been laid to rest.

The process of democratisation is sometimes seen as a source of instability and even war. But there is scant evidence in Asia that newly democratic governments have gone to war with their neighbours (an exception could be India and Pakistan in the late 1990s). Instead, newly democratic regimes, such as Thailand with Chatchai Choonhavan in the late 1980s, South Korea under Kim Dae Jung in the 1990s, and Indonesia post-Suharto), have pursued generally moderate and peaceful relations with their neighbours. Moreover, in these countries, as well as in Taiwan after Chiang Kai-shek, have we have seen that democratization has sharply reduced domestic violence and death compared to the period under authoritarian rule. As could be seen from the human security data presented earlier, authoritarian regimes in Indonesia, Cambodia, and Myanmar perpetrated substantial domestic violence. Hence, one might ask whether it is the persistence of stark authoritarian rule that might engender greater domestic violence than transitions to democracy. Dictatorships can never secure long-term popular acquiescence, and are often tempted to meet demands for political change with violent repression, thereby causing the very instability they seek to avoid.

**Transnational Challenges**

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Transnational threats – environmental degradation, pandemics, terrorism, maritime piracy, pandemics, financial volatility, drug trafficking, people smuggling, money laundering, and other forms of transnational crime, etc. - respect no national boundaries. Some come at very short notice, like the SARS pandemic in 2003 or the terrorist bombings in Bali in 2002. Others, like climate change, have a long gestation period, are thus likely to be ignored by policymakers. Certain aspects of globalization, such as the transport revolution and tourism, aggravate and act as a transmission belt for many such challenges. Perhaps on the positive side, because transnational threats defy unilateral or national remedies; regional and international cooperation becomes a necessity, rather than a matter of choice.

Climate change may turn out to be especially important as a security challenge to ASEAN for the coming two decades. Climate change is widely regarded as a threat to global and regional security. A study by the Center for Naval Analysis in the US argues:

> Unlike most conventional security threats that involve a single entity acting in specific ways and points in time, climate change has the potential to result in multiple chronic conditions, occurring globally within the same time frame. Economic and environmental conditions in already fragile areas will further erode as food production declines, diseases increase, clean water becomes increasingly scarce, and large populations move in search of resources. Weakened and failing governments, with an already thin margin for survival, foster the conditions for internal conflicts, extremism, and movement toward increased authoritarianism and radical ideologies.  

It is difficult to consider the impact of climate change within a strictly ASEAN context, given the proximity of the ASEAN to South Asia and China, two of the most vulnerable regions to the security implications of climate change. Thus, in a report to the US Defense Department, Peter Schwartz and Doug Randall argue that by 2020, “persistent conflict in South East Asia; Burma, Laos, Vietnam, India, China” could occur as a result of climate change. The Center for Naval Analysis study suggest that due to climate change, China could suffer from “decreased reliability of the monsoon rains, longer, colder winters and hotter summers caused by climate change (decreased evaporative cooling because of reduced precipitation), could lead to widespread famine, chaos and internal struggles and conflict with Russia and western neighbours for energy resources.” For Bangladesh, the consequences could be a rise in sea levels, storm surges, and coastal erosion, all of which would make “much of Bangladesh nearly uninhabitable”, as the rising sea level might contaminate fresh water supplies inland, including drinking water. A related consequence would be large-scale emigration, which would trigger tension with neighbours, including India, China and Southeast Asian countries. The report also warns that, India and Indonesia could experience “violent storms, deaths from war and famine, riots and internal conflicts”. Furthermore, since several of Asia’s major rivers—the Indus, Ganges, Mekong, Yangtze, and Yellow—originate in the Himalayas, “If the massive

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20 I do not discuss financial volatility in this paper, as it would be covered other papers in this ADBI project. For a detailed discussion of the security implications of the 1997 financial crisis, see: Amitav Acharya, “realism, Institutionalism and the Asian Economic Crisis,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol.21, no.1 (April 1999), pp.1-29. Lack of space also precludes a discussion of maritime piracy, drugs, people-smuggling and other forms of transnational crime as they affect ASEAN.


23 Ibid., p.17.

snow/ice sheet in the Himalayas—the third-largest ice sheet in the world, after those in Antarctic and Greenland—continues to melt, it will dramatically reduce the water supply of much of Asia.  

ASEAN has already seen how haze from forest fires in Indonesia could cause discontentment and tension (both at popular and official levels) in Indonesia’s relations with Singapore and Malaysia. Climate change has the potential to significantly aggravate the degradation of ASEAN’s environment already caused by deforestation. Between the period of 1980 to 2007, the ASEAN forests have decreased by a total of 555,587 square kilometres, an area roughly the size of Thailand; or by an annual average rate of 20,578 square kilometres, an area almost 29 times the size of Singapore. (See Table 3). Although the data is uncertain, climate change has been linked to increasing severity of storms and floods. The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami showed that the erosion of mangroves could cause intensified damage to coastal areas. The dramatic reduction of mangrove coverage in ASEAN (Table 4) could thus amplify the impact of storms and Tsunamis.

Table 3: Forest Area in the ASEAN region in 1980-2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASEAN Members</th>
<th>1980 (km²)</th>
<th>1990 (km²)</th>
<th>2000 (km²)</th>
<th>2007 (km²)</th>
<th>Annual Rate of Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brunei</td>
<td>4,830</td>
<td>3,130</td>
<td>4,430</td>
<td>4,380</td>
<td>-0,14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>120,300</td>
<td>129,460</td>
<td>115,410</td>
<td>100,094</td>
<td>-1,66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>1,246,220</td>
<td>1,165,670</td>
<td>978,520</td>
<td>847,522</td>
<td>-1,67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao PDR</td>
<td>144,700</td>
<td>173,140</td>
<td>99,332</td>
<td>96,407</td>
<td>-0,37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>217,220</td>
<td>223,760</td>
<td>201,600</td>
<td>196,630</td>
<td>-0,31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>329,290</td>
<td>392,190</td>
<td>345,540</td>
<td>312,900</td>
<td>-1,18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>110,260</td>
<td>105,740</td>
<td>79,490</td>
<td>68,472</td>
<td>-1,73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>189,930</td>
<td>159,650</td>
<td>148,140</td>
<td>144,024</td>
<td>-0,35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>106,380</td>
<td>93,630</td>
<td>117,250</td>
<td>134,134</td>
<td>1,80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>2,460,180</td>
<td>2,446,393</td>
<td>2,089,742</td>
<td>1,904,593</td>
<td>-1,11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity, ASEAN Biodiversity Outlook, Philippines, 2010

Table 4: Area coverage of mangroves in the ASEAN region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASEAN Members</th>
<th>1980 (km²)</th>
<th>2005 (km²)</th>
<th>1980 and 2005 difference (km²)</th>
<th>Percentage to ASEAN total remaining Mangrove Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brunei</td>
<td>184,0</td>
<td>184,5</td>
<td>0,5</td>
<td>0,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>912,0</td>
<td>692,0</td>
<td>220,0</td>
<td>24,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>42,000,0</td>
<td>29,000,0</td>
<td>13,000,0</td>
<td>34,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao PDR</td>
<td>7,000,0</td>
<td>7,000,0</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>61,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>6,740,0</td>
<td>5,650,0</td>
<td>1,090,0</td>
<td>16,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>5,555,0</td>
<td>5,070,0</td>
<td>485,0</td>
<td>8,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>2,950,0</td>
<td>2,400,0</td>
<td>550,0</td>
<td>18,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>17,9</td>
<td>5,0</td>
<td>12,9</td>
<td>72,1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: ASEAN’s Goals and Measures Related to Climate Change

| Goal: The ASEAN Vision 2020 calls for a “clean and green” ASEAN with fully established mechanisms to ensure the protection of the environment, and the sustainable use and management of natural resources, and high quality of life for people in the region |
| Measures (since 2007): |
| ASEAN Declaration on Environmental Sustainability (13th ASEAN Summit in 2007) |
| ASEAN Declaration on COP-13 to the UNFCCC and CMP-3 to the Kyoto Protocol (13th ASEAN Summit in 2007). |
| Singapore Declaration on Climate Change, Energy and the Environment (3rd EAS Summit in 2007) |
| ASEAN Joint Statement on Climate Change to COP-15 to the UNFCCC and CMP-5 to the Kyoto Protocol (15th ASEAN Summit in 2009) |
| Singapore Resolution on Environmental Sustainability and Climate Change (11th AMME in 2009). |

Source: ASEAN Secretariat

Table 6: Number of Disasters* by Country, 2000-2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>29.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao P Dem Rep</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>6.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>28.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>10.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timor-Leste</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viet Nam</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>15.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>100.00</strong></td>
<td>516</td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Disasters include: Drought; Earthquake (seismic activity); Epidemic; Extreme temperature; Flood; Insect infestation; Mass movement dry; Mass movement wet; Storm; Volcano; Wildfire; Source: “EM-DAT: The OFDA/CRED International Disaster Database www.emdat.be - Université Catholique de Louvain - Brussels - Belgium”

ASEAN as a subregion also faces special dangers of its own when it comes to climate change. Raman Letcumanan, Head of the Environment Division, ASEAN Secretariat, puts the security implications of climate change for ASEAN succinctly:

ASEAN is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change due to the concentration of people and economic activities in the coastal areas, its rich biological diversity, resource-based economies, and the increased vulnerability of the people especially the poor. Due to
its geological and geographical factors, the region is also one of the world’s vulnerable regions to suffer from a range of climactic and natural hazards such as earthquakes, typhoons, sea level rise, volcanic eruptions, droughts, heat waves and tsunamis which are becoming more frequent and severe. In addition, the geophysical and climactic conditions shared by the region have also led to common and trans-boundary environmental concerns such as air and water pollution, urban environmental degradation and trans-boundary haze pollution.  

Despite the widespread fear of terrorist attacks in Southeast Asia sparked by the Bali and Jakarta bombings in the 2000s, terrorism has proven to be an exaggerated risk for ASEAN. Modern terrorism is truly a transnational threat, given the ability of radical groups to plan and execute attacks in several countries at the same time, operate across national boundaries, and secure funds and other forms of support sources worldwide. Part of the credit for this should be given to increasing vigilance and preventive actions by individual ASEAN governments, including, after a period of hesitancy, newly democratic Indonesia. Also important were various forms of bilateral and multilateral - both intra-ASEAN and extra-ASEAN- intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism cooperation. Whatever the reason, it is clear that the Jemah Islamiyah group, in cooperation with Al Qaeda, is hardly in a position to establish a regional network of terror (or an Islamic Caliphate incorporating territories from Malaysia, southern Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, southern Thailand and even northern Australia, as some analysts had feared), with a view to seriously disrupt tourism, travel, economic development and political stability in the region. Moreover, as noted, as with other transnational threats, especially pandemics, natural disasters and drug trafficking, the threats of terrorism and piracy have proven to be a catalyst of regional cooperation (Table 7). This situation is unlikely to change for the foreseeable future, barring a collapse of Indonesian state.

Table 7: ASEAN Cooperation on Terrorism:

- ASEAN Declaration on Transnational Crime, Manila, 20 December, 1997
- ASEAN Plan of Action to combat Transnational Crime, 1999
- ASEAN Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism, Bandar Seri Begawan, S November 2001
- Declaration on Terrorism of the Eight ASEAN Summit, November 2002
- Agreement on Information Exchange and Establishment of Communication Procedure, Putrajaya, Malaysia, 7th May 2002
- Work Programme to Implement the ASEAN Plan of Action to Combat Transnational Crime, Kuala Lumpur, 17 May 2002
- Treaty on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters, Kuala Lumpur, 29 November 2004
- ASEAN Convention on Counter terrorism, Cebu, Philippines, 13 April 2007

International Cooperation:
Agreements with the USA, Australia and Japan
ASEAN-US Common Declaration on improving cooperation between intelligent agencies, July 2002
ASEAN also signed Joint Declarations with all its ten Dialogue partners.
With China also signed a Declaration on Non Traditional Security issues.

The SARS episode was a powerful reminder that pandemic outbreaks are unpredictable, closely linked to the effects of globalization, and utterly defiant of national borders or national remedies.

Mercifully for ASEAN, SARS was short-lived and its economic costs, though not insignificant, tolerable (Table 7). Had it lingered for a year, the economic damage would might have been enormous. Given the fact that new forms of infectious disease and pandemics are discovered by scientists with alarming regularity, future crises over pandemic outbreaks should command ASEAN's (and that of East Asian groupings like the APT and EAS) serious attention, as they have done so since 2003.

Table 8: Cost of SARS for East and Southeast Asian Economies in 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Consumer Spending</th>
<th>GDP</th>
<th>TFE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$ billion</td>
<td>% GDP</td>
<td>$ billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRC</td>
<td>4,2</td>
<td>0,3</td>
<td>6,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>3,4</td>
<td>2,2</td>
<td>4,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>0,1</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>0,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taipei</td>
<td>1,8</td>
<td>0,6</td>
<td>1,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>0,3</td>
<td>0,1</td>
<td>0,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>0,4</td>
<td>0,4</td>
<td>0,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>0,6</td>
<td>0,7</td>
<td>2,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>1,0</td>
<td>0,7</td>
<td>1,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>0,4</td>
<td>1,1</td>
<td>0,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18,0</td>
<td>0,6</td>
<td>59,0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Competition for energy resources may well worsen, as a source of rivalry and conflict in Asia and the world for the next twenty years. For ASEAN, Sino-Indian competition for access to the energy resources in Myanmar ought to be a matter of concern for ASEAN, since it undermines cooperation among the two Asian powers which is to ASEAN's benefit. Explorations for oil and gas by claimant nations have already aggravated the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. If substantial reserves are found there, it would lead to a dramatic rise in tensions among the claimants, thereby rendering ASEAN a major focal point of global energy competition and conflict. Water is another source of inter-state rivalry and regional conflict involving ASEAN and China, especially in the Mekong region where China's building of a series of dams in the upper reaches of the river has already caused anxiety and discontentment among the downstream ASEAN countries. How China handles the flow of water, given its significant implications for fisheries and agriculture in mainland Southeast Asian states, will be an important test of China's regional role. While ASEAN is not directly involved as an institution in managing the Mekong issue, it cannot escape the adverse consequences of tensions over Mekong.

Conclusion: ASEAN's Further Evolution

ASEAN's irrelevance or even death has been predicted several times before. At birth in 1967, few people thought it would live to see another decade, given that the two previous attempts at regional cooperation in Southeast Asia, the Association of Southeast Asia and the MAPHILINDO (Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia) concept, had ended within a few years after their creation. The Malaysia-Philippines dispute over Sabah in 1969, the aftermath of the US withdrawal from Indochina in 1975, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1979, the end of the Cold War, and the outbreak of the Asian financial crisis in 1997, have all been seen as critical blows to ASEAN. But ASEAN survived, even got a little strengthened each time. So there is precedent, and hope, that ASEAN would be around in 2030.
But surviving is not the same as thriving. In 2030, ASEAN might still keep plodding on, but would it still be a key player in regional peace, stability and prosperity in Asia – a role that it currently enjoys? Here, the question becomes more difficult to answer.

The answer might well depend on three key questions. First, what would be ASEAN’s relations with the great powers? The biggest fear for ASEAN is that it will be swept aside by the rise of its two most powerful immediate neighbours: China and India, and the resulting tide of great power competition that would draw in the US and Japan as well. As discussed earlier, ASEAN emerged at a time when India and China had just fought a war with each other and faced major domestic challenges, including Mao’s cultural revolution in China. Japan in the late 1960s and 70s was still in a recovery mode, politically if not economically. The field was thus open for ASEAN for anchoring regional cooperation.

How different is the situation today! China and India are racing to join Japan and US in the great power club, and seeking their rightful place at the top of world affairs. Japan, though stagnant economically, is reorienting itself – as a ‘normal state’ - to an active political and military role in Asia. Some things remain unchanged though. China, Japan and India do cancel each other due to their mutual mistrust. All three and the US want ASEAN accept its leadership in Asian regional cooperation.

Some imagine a concert of powers developing in Asia, wherein China, Japan, India and the United States could jointly manage regional security issues. This would marginalize ASEAN. As the saying in Southeast Asia goes, the grass suffers not only when the elephants fight, but also when they make love. But Asian concert of powers would require the powers to overcome differences which are neither temporary nor trivial.

A second question about ASEAN’s future: what would be the state of intra-ASEAN relations? Here, the ongoing skirmishes on the Thai-Cambodian border do not inspire confidence. Simmering rivalries and mistrust continue to cloud relationships between Singapore and Malaysia, Thailand and Burma, and Malaysia and Thailand. But this is a far cry from the 1960s and 70s, and there is reason to hope (but as they say, hope is not a policy) that these intra-ASEAN conflicts would not doom the organization. They would need, however, to be managed carefully, especially with the help of existing and new mechanisms that ASEAN is currently seeking to develop.

The third question is perhaps the most important. What would the domestic political configurations of ASEAN countries look like? Would ASEAN countries become more open and democratic? Indonesia has surely taken a major leap towards democracy. But we have seen a military takeover, however brief, in Thailand in 2006 and continuing frustration with Burma. Domestic succession in many ASEAN countries remains uncertain and even volatile. Domestic turbulence can spill over borders and limit ASEAN members’ ability to contribute to regional public good. As a regional group, ASEAN can not shape the domestic politics of its members, but a collective commitment to participatory democracy and regionalism does help. The idea of a People’s ASEAN, but thus far, this has only meant fostering cultural exchanges and cooperation, not promoting or defending democracy (although Indonesia’s efforts through the Bali Democracy Forum is praiseworthy). ASEAN has made a tentative commitment to human rights, but this remains constrained by the resilience of the non-interference norm.

In essence, to stay relevant and perform effectively as “the fulcrum of geopolitical stability in Asia”, ASEAN must commit itself to four goals:

**Centrality:** The principle ASEAN centrality implies that ASEAN must keep its seat at the ‘driver’s table’ of the most important existing Asian regional institutions, especially the ARF, and the EAS, and that it should not allow itself to be sidelined, or marginalized by the initiatives from others, especially the great powers, to develop new or competing regional bodies covering Asia as a whole. The principle of ASEAN centrality is not an accident of history, but rooted in past historical political conditions favouring Asia’s weaker states in developing regional cooperation.27

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ASEAN centrality does not owe itself not to the generosity of the big powers, but to two other long-term factors. First, none of these great powers - including the US, China, Japan and India – would be acceptable by the rest of the region as the sole driver of regionalism as each carries a baggage from the past. Second, the two most important East Asian powers, China and Japan, do not find each other acceptable in such a role, and the prospect for a Sino-Japanese rapprochement in the manner of the post-War Franco-German reconciliation, which will provide the strongest challenge to ASEAN centrality, does not appear likely in the immediate future. But this does not mean ASEAN can take the principle for granted. It has come under scrutiny for giving ASEAN too much control. Critics of ASEAN centrality argue that ASEAN may be unable to muster the resources and political will to exercise effective leadership role in dealing with the big issues of the day. ASEAN should do its best to address both perceptions, with a pro-active and robust system of dealing with regional crises and advancing common projects, without diluting its centrality - a major challenge for the organization in the coming years.

**Compliance:** The second goal has to do with compliance. ASEAN has a whole host of old and new declarations, agreements, treaties, conventions, protocols, plans of action, blueprints, concords, etc. to address a growing number of old and new challenges. But the key is to ensure members’ compliance. ASEAN’s sometimes well-deserved reputation as a talk shop stems not from a lack of cooperative instruments, but the failure to adhere to them. Another issue is their poor ‘usability’. ASEAN now has a program of monitoring member states’ compliance with the blueprints of its three communities, but mere compliance with implementation measures would not suffice unless the mechanisms thus created are actually put into practice, such as conflict resolution mechanisms like the High Council and the ‘good offices’ role of the Secretary-General and the ASEAN Chair. At the same time, ASEAN must engage in capacity-building to implement and realize its various political and security objectives, as outlined in the Blueprint for the ASEAN Political Security Community. Natural disasters and their management increasingly demand ASEAN’s attention and resources, although its impact is likely to be cooperative, rather than competitive. Indeed, disaster management is one of the areas in which ASEAN, along with the ASEAN Regional Forum, seems to have made considerable progress.

**Conflict Resolution:** ASEAN’s practice of “sweeping conflicts under the carpet” is no longer adequate by self, if it ever was. As with domestic conflicts and terrorism, at least some inter-state and regional conflicts require a resolution of their “root causes” in order to be removed permanently as barriers to stability and cooperation. ASEAN should thus embrace the challenge of conflict resolution as well as preventive diplomacy. The ARF has sought these goals since inception, but the conflict resolution objective was renamed to a seemingly innocuous phrase: “elaboration of approaches to conflicts”, reportedly at China’s insistence. ASEAN should now seek conflict resolution as part of its own agenda, by making existing regional arbitration mechanisms more juridical (with the help of a Council of third-party judges, for example), and introducing certain amount of automaticity to their implementation.

**Common/Cooperative Security:** While this is a well-established principle of ASEAN and the ARF, sustaining it for the long-term cannot be taken for granted. The key to this principle is ‘inclusiveness’ (inviting all relevant actors to the table and excluding none) and ‘non-discrimination’ or ‘impartiality’ (giving equal treatment to all actors, including the great powers, refraining from taking sides in the conflicts among them, and offering them a comforting atmosphere to sort out their differences). As China’s power grows, there will be temptations for and opportunistic moves by individual ASEAN members to take China’s side on critical territorial or strategic issues. There is no evidence as yet that either China or India is pursuing a ‘divide-and-rule’ approach towards ASEAN, but China may feel the temptation to do so in the future when its ‘core interests’ are at stake, by offering some ASEAN members substantial rewards for their exclusive friendship (such as economic and military aid, favourable stance towards their territorial claims, separate bilateral deals with individual claimants to the South China Sea, political support for regimes facing international pressure over human rights/democracy). Resisting temptations for such a “special relationship” with
China (or India, or for that matter the U.S.) and maintaining its ‘honest broker’ image and role in dealing with the great powers are vital for ASEAN to stay relevant in the multipolar Asian order. Such an approach should be consistent with the concept of ‘dynamic equilibrium’ introduced by Marty Natalegawa, the Foreign Minister of Indonesia and the chair of ASEAN in 2011.28

In conclusion, one could imagine ASEAN in 2030 either as the wise counselor of Asia, or a marginalized relic of the past. Approaching its mid-sixties, it could still be at its peak, functioning as a steady and calming influence on the rising powers of Asia: India and China. Or it might have lost its bearings, amidst the confusion of profound changes in the regional economic and military balance of power.

To avoid the latter fate, ASEAN’s current leaders must stay united, strengthen mechanisms for cooperation, steadfastly maintain its neutral broker image among the great powers and be attentive to their people’s voices. By doing so, they will have a good chance of retaining ASEAN’s driver’s seat in Asian regional cooperation.

28 ‘Dynamic equilibrium’ is distinct from a ‘balance of power’ approach. Whereas the latter of based on adversarial alliances and coalitions, ‘dynamic equilibrium’ means engaging all major players to create a benign and stable regional architecture. Author’s Personal Interview with Dr Marty Natalegawa, Jakarta, 5 July 2011.
Appendix 1

Summary of the ASEAN Political and Security Community Blueprint

The APSC Blueprint is aimed at providing the roadman and timetable to establish the ASEAN Security Community by 2015. It is guided by the ASEAN Charter and by the principles contained therein. Notably, the APSC and the ASEAN Charter subscribe to a comprehensive approach to security, which acknowledges the interwoven relationships between all dimensions of security political, economic, socio-cultural and environmental development. Therefore, on one hand the APSC promotes the renunciation of aggression and of the threat and use of force and, in this regard it upholds the existing ASEAN mechanisms (ZOPFAN, the TAC and the Treaty on Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone), but on the other, also seeks to address non traditional security challenges.

Based on these ideas the APSC pursues the following three goals:

1) A ruled based Community of Shared Norms and Values
2) A Cohesive, Peaceful, Stable and Resilient region with shared responsibility for comprehensive security
3) A dynamic and outward looking region in an increasingly integrated and interdependent world

To achieve these goals the ASEAN security Blueprint outlines a number of specific activities that have to be undertaken by ASEAN members in the following areas:

1.1 A ruled based Community of Shared Norms and Values

Cooperation in Political Development

1.1. Promote Understanding and appreciation of Political systems, culture and history of ASEAN members
1.2. Lay the Groundwork for an institutional framework to facilitate free flow of information for mutual support and assistance of ASEAN members
1.3. Establish Programmes for Mutual Support and Assistance among ASEAN members in the Development of Strategies for Strengthening the rule of Law and Judiciary System and Legal Infrastructure
1.4. Promote good governance
1.5. Promotion and Protection of Human Rights
1.6. Increase the participation of the relevant entities associated with ASEAN in moving forward ASEAN political development initiatives
1.7. Prevent and Combat Corruption
1.8. Promote Principles of Democracy
1.9. Promote Peace and Stability in the region

Shaping and Sharing ASEAN Norms

2.1 Adjust ASEAN institutional Framework to comply with the ASEAN Charter
2.2. Strengthening Cooperation under the TAC
2.3 Ensure the full implementation of the DOC for the South China Sea
2.4 Ensure the implementation of the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Treaty and its Plan of Action

2.5 Promote ASEAN Maritime Cooperation

2) A Cohesive, Peaceful, Stable and Resilient region with shared responsibility for comprehensive security

Conflict Prevention/ Confidence Building Measures

1.1 Strengthen Confidence Building Measures

1.2 Promote Greater Transparency and Understanding of defence policies and security perceptions

1.3 Build up the necessary institutional framework to strengthen the ARF process in support of the ASEAN Political Security Community

1.4 Strengthen efforts in maintaining respect for territorial integrity, sovereignty and unity of ASEAN members

1.5 Promote the development of norms that enhance ASEAN defence and security cooperation

1.6 Conflict resolution and pacific settlement of disputes

1.7 Building up of existing modes of pacific settlement of disputes and consider strengthening them with additional mechanisms as needed

1.8 Strengthen research activities on peace, conflict management and conflict resolution

1.9 Promote regional cooperation to maintain peace and stability

1.10 Post Conflict peace building

1.11 Strengthen ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance

1.12 Implement Human Resources and capacity building programmes in post conflict areas

1.13 Increase cooperation in reconciliation and further strengthen peace oriented values

Non Traditional security issues

1.1 Strengthen Cooperation in addressing non traditional security issues, particularly in combating transnational crime and other Transboundary challenges

1.2 Intensify counterterrorism efforts by early ratification and full implementation on the ASEAN Convention on Counterterrorism
1.3 Strengthen ASEAN Cooperation on Disaster Management and Emergency response

1.4. Effective and Timely response to urgent issues or crisis situations affecting ASEAN