

Whither ASEAN: Intergovernmental Association or an integrated community? by Muthiah Alagappa

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Formed in 1967, ASEAN is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. Key questions at this juncture are: Whither ASEAN and what is the road ahead for ASEAN? I posit two ways forward: continue as an intergovernmental association building on past successes or move forward to an integrated community along the lines of the EU which, at least until recently, is supposed to move toward an “ever closer union.” I support an intergovernmental association that builds on past successes of ASEAN. The expansive conception of community that is synonymous with an integrated community will be difficult to realize and will subject ASEAN to unnecessary criticism and ridicule along the lines that the “Emperor has no clothes.” The EU is facing challenges in its “ever closer union” project in the context of the exit of Britain from the EU and the financial issues confronting Greece and other countries; one cannot but think the European Union project has peaked. Europe does not appear to have overcome the tensions between national states and regional integration.

Regional integration calls for some elements of supranational policy and organization. Supranationalism is not desirable in Southeast Asia where most countries became independent after World War II. Southeast Asian countries are still in the early stages of making nations and states. The first priority of political elites in these countries is to build strong cohesive nations and states in their preferred images, which will enable them to continue in office. Although, from time to time, they may support regional integration to build an ASEAN community, their primary goals are national – national security, national development, and national identity. They resort to national policies to address crises like that in 1997-8 and in resolving disputes among them and with external parties as in the South China Sea. Some leaders do press for expansive conceptions of community especially when they are chairing ASEAN meetings or addressing international audiences focused on ASEAN. This is largely an exercise in playing to the gallery, however. For the most part, political leaders and officials in ASEAN view the Association as an avenue for regional coordination and cooperation to aid in making national communities. Their primary goal is “ever closer cooperation” not regional integration or union.

The term community is used widely and rather loosely in ASEAN circles. While many ASEAN documents including the ASEAN Charter, ASEAN Community Vision 2025, and the three ASEAN community pillars use the term community

frequently, there has been no effort to define the term even in the most general terms. When queried, one common response from ASEAN and national officials dealing with ASEAN matters is that there is no need to define community. They claim the meaning to be self-evident or that ambiguity serves ASEAN’s purposes. It is not clear how self-evidence or ambiguity aids in setting goals and in enacting policies.

This lack of rigor should not detract from the fact that ASEAN is widely recognized as a successful regional organization. Much of the criticism stems from misunderstandings and gaps arising from expansive projections of the Association as an integrated community. ASEAN is a community of sovereign states that do not intend to delegate power to supranational organizations. Some integration of policy may be required to enable more effective coordination and cooperation but a highly integrated community is not the goal. ASEAN’s agenda should build on past successes in the political-security, economic, and sociocultural arenas and avoid going into areas like integration and unification that are not realizable.

In building on past successes, it is important not to overstate achievements. In the political-security arena, for example, ASEAN has been quite successful as a diplomatic community. In the 1980s it spearheaded the UN opposition to Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia. More recently, ASEAN has not been able to adopt a common diplomatic position vis-a-vis the disputes in the South China Sea. However, when a common position can be forged, ASEAN can play an important role in enhancing the diplomatic voice of member countries. ASEAN’s enhanced international standing has increased its prestige, creating a virtuous cycle.

In the security domain, too, ASEAN has made important contributions although such contributions tend to be exaggerated. Despite suggestions and claims to the contrary, ASEAN has not become a security community or even a quasi-security community. It has become common to attribute the absence of war in Southeast Asia to ASEAN, but there are many reasons why there has been no international war in Southeast Asia over the past 40 years or so. Coexistence does not constitute causation.

Political disputes like that over Sabah remain unresolved. In addition, the mechanism for conflict resolution among member states stipulated in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation remains unrealized. Though some bilateral disputes, like the conflict between Singapore and Malaysia over Pulau Batu Puteh or Pedra Branca and the disputes over Sipidan and Ligitan islands between Malaysia and Indonesia, have been resolved peacefully, countries have relied upon international agencies like the Hague court rather than the mechanism set out in the ASEAN Treaty. More importantly,

the peaceful settlement between Indonesia and Malaysia has become a severe impediment to further dispute settlement between these countries through negotiation and international arbitration.

Nevertheless, ASEAN has contributed to the security of member countries, especially the smaller ones, by helping to stabilize the political map of Southeast Asia. It has also generated norms that prevent aggression and interference in the internal affairs of member countries.

ASEAN's achievements in the economic domain are limited. Most countries have relied on national policies for their growth and development. Countries have sought to join non-ASEAN trading arrangements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and to rely on the World Trade Organization (WTO). Still, cooperation through ASEAN has enabled financial swap arrangements like the Chiang Mai initiative to facilitate multilateral currency swaps to manage short-term liquidity problems.

Despite its limited contribution, economic cooperation in ASEAN has received much attention. ASEAN has ambitious goals that require integration of the ASEAN economies. Realization of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015 is a major milestone. The road map to an ASEAN Economic Community adopted in 2015 envisions ASEAN as single market and production base with free flow of goods, services, investments, capitals and skilled labor. It envisions a highly integrated and cohesive ASEAN economy by 2025. This goal requires a high level of integration of ASEAN's 10 economies – which may not be realizable. Such goals and vision belie the expansive conception of community and the accompanying critique of ASEAN.

It is important to tone down the expansive conception of community and build on ASEAN's successes as an intergovernmental organization. ASEAN should be viewed essentially as a means to foster cooperation among countries in the region, which desire to be masters in their neighborhood. The community envisioned by ASEAN is a community of independent nations that seek to live together in peace and prosperity. A minimalist conception of community along these lines will serve ASEAN well in the next two to three decades.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.