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Fin de Siecle, Fin de l'ASEAN? by James Clad

The 20th century's passage has closed the door, mercifully, on a turbulent hundred years in Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, the new century may have closed off a more beneficial Asian phenomenon – a 30 year run by one of the most successful sub-regional groupings ever to emerge in international politics.

Southeast Asia's order has always been a passive beneficiary of global and East Asian trends, yet the equilibrium achieved managed to loop a miscellany of states – powerful/weak, large/small, democratic/authoritarian, industrial/agricultural – into an often reified acronym, 'ASEAN' – the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Naïve outsiders often mistook it for a nascent supranational grouping or alliance, but ASEAN's members never had illusions about the limits of their regional order.

For them, both the ASEAN "core" of Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines and later the expanded 10-nation grouping would always be, even in halcyon years, a device of 'minimal diplomatic utility.' They understood that their incompletely consolidated states simply maximized a number of propitious historical moments, including long spells of tolerably good leadership and favorable external trading and security circumstances. For three decades, lucky but patently atypical circumstances gave Southeast Asia sufficient leverage to balance external powers.

Let us be clear about what 'power-balancing' means in the ASEAN context: keeping well-disposed but distant external powers interested enough in the region that ASEAN's hand can be reinforced in dealing with local or regional hegemonic ambitions – whether from a Soviet-backed Vietnam or now, from a steadily more powerful China. 'Balance of power,' in ASEAN-speak, thus means mediating destabilizing challenges in the context of competing Great Power interests.

This fact of life limited the extent of the ASEAN experiment, guaranteeing a brake on genuine regionalism – whether in market creation or even minimal consensus about standards of governance. Of course, this limitation never prevented member states from maximizing the ASEAN nametag to full effect abroad. At the UN and in world capitals, the ASEANs talked a big game, casually suggesting, for example, the prospect of real regional economic integration when the Maastricht and NAFTA treaties gave their export-dependent economies a bad scare ten years ago.

Yet, the 'ASEAN Free Trade Area' (AFTA), touted as a do-able objective since 1987, now lies moribund, a casualty of the destabilizing currency crises of mid-1997. Even before the crisis, measurements of genuine regional market creation contrasted poorly to buoyant projections issued from gatherings of ASEAN's economic ministers. Now, the grouping's bogus commitment to unachievable tariff deadlines can no longer be disguised.

And, the grouping's core financial weakness remains unaltered. Banking systems operate with a supreme indifference to due diligence, still unwilling – after three punishing years – to apportion corporate responsibility or to work out debt. Instead, a time-tested system of favoritism continues as if the 1997 currency blowouts had never occurred. The provision of credit lifelines to politically well-placed people and ethnic Chinese remains almost completely impervious to change. Indeed, the region's response to the financial and banking crises shows an almost breathtaking resilience of 'traditional adjustment strategies.'

ASEAN's very existence has always rested on former Indonesian president Suharto's rapprochement with Malaysia, in the mid-1960s. And the basics remain the same today: Indonesia's unity and stability still enable, or disable, the tenuous regional order put in place by the [now] much-maligned Suharto regime. All ASEAN players know this fact of life instinctively.

Given this thin soil, ASEAN's ersatz regionalism never had a chance to become something more substantial. Like flying buttresses holding up a cathedral's walls, ASEAN has become a derivative of single issues in which minimal consensus can be achieved. Unlike a real alliance, the principle of subsidiarity applies to the region's security: China's, Japan's and America's interrelationships drive ASEAN; it's never the other way around. Even the South China Sea remains of second-order importance against broader shifts in Sino-Japanese-U.S. relations.

The putative regional order, encapsulated in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) established in 1991, won interest from a Clinton Administration enamored of multilateralism. But the combination of ill-advised ASEAN enlargement after 1995, the region-wide financial crisis, and Malaysia's and Indonesia's political transitions after 1998 – all guaranteed a near collapse of the ARF's pretensions. When internal and external challenges became enmeshed with one another after the mid-1990s, the 'jig' [as the old saying has it] 'was up.' Consider ASEAN's response to the turmoil over East Timor. It proved incapable of playing any serious role in the ad hoc problem-solving. Or consider ASEAN's futility in the face of Cambodian and Burmese indifference to minimal codes of domestic conduct.

ASEAN's various political transitions, accelerated by financial and bank crises, are the most pressing of its challenges. In domestic policies, a renewed attention to basic survival, or to managing unwieldy domestic coalitions, has dominated the agenda. In security policy, a multi-layered approach is combined with a "what-me-worry?" stance toward the emergence of China.

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ASEAN's mistimed enlargement to include Vietnam and then Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar, also occurred at this time. The 1990s saw increasing signs that an emergent China was disinclined to take the minimalist theater of "multilateral engagement" very seriously. During the halcyon three decades, ASEAN's reach always had exceeded its arm – a conceit enabled by the permissive environment of U.S. maritime hegemony. But when even minimal regional cohesion could no longer be pretended – as when China moved, again in 1998, in areas of the Spratlys contested by Philippine claims – the fake edifice had no response to offer.

Indeed, the multiple crises evoked something rather strange, something rather psychological, in the region's flights of fancy at Manila's East Asian summit in late 1999. Though palpably worried about China's unilateralist ambition and patently aware of Japan's directionless diplomacy, the ASEANs swooned over the prospect of a "new East Asian multilateralism" that no one, least of all the foreign ministers attending the event, believed.

Understanding that ASEAN could never, and can never, become a source of independent volition in the region's economics or politics does not mean that we should accept the disappearance of the long era of minimal ASEAN cohesion with equanimity. By 1996, it had become clear that Indonesia's Suharto straightjacket, and impending transitions in Malaysia, Vietnam and elsewhere, virtually guaranteed for ASEAN a period of motionless survival, at best. At worst, the grouping faced what the intervening period has brought in full measure: Irrelevance. The demise of East Asia's tacit Cold War alliance system left ASEAN scrambling to keep the U.S. "involved." This became especially clear when, by the late 1980s, a quiet consensus had emerged in Washington to let its Luzon naval and air bases revert to Philippine control if, as happened in 1991, the Philippine Senate should reject the bases renewal treaty.

Another clue emerged in ASEAN membership enlargement. This imported far less developed societies with rigid authoritarian mindsets and finely tuned habits of being especially alert to China's concerns. The bizarre notion, another Washington conceit, that ASEAN's enlargement might augur a proto-alliance able to 'balance' China had always been absurd. Widening the already consensus-paralyzed decision making procedures to Rangoon's, Vientiane's, Hanoi's and Phnom Penh's voices guaranteed that precious little resolve would be mustered in future for any type of multilateral standoff with China, however muted or oblique the approach might be. Pre-crisis ASEAN, backed by [belated] American resolve after May 1995, had led to genuinely multilateral discussion about China's late-1994 seizure of Mischief Reef. The Chinese hated this result.

With its "core" membership then still intact, the ASEAN states had used the U.S. posture – a mild but pointed briefing comment by the State Department spokesman touching generally on freedom of navigation – to talk seriously to China in Hangchow. Contrast this qualified 'success' [after all, the Chinese remain on the reef] to the response to China's decision in October 1998 to add new structures on the same atoll – despite an agreed "code of conduct" between Beijing and Manila.

This new Chinese move elicited echoing silence from the ASEAN Heads of Government Summit convening in Hanoi in December 1998. American efforts to attract at least one ASEAN state to voice support for a U.S. expression of concern met with evasion by mid-1999 when senior "ASEAN-Plus" officials (ASEAN and its Nine Dialogue Partners) met. (This obviously did not include Manila, always keen to use Chinese intrusions as leverage for U.S. military concessionary sales.)

I would not want these comments to be taken as adding credence to the 'China-as-enemy' school, now so hard at work in the U.S., still agonizing about how directly challenging, and in what terms, the changing East Asian power equation has become. The ASEAN states realistically see China's regional pressure as a fact of life, with Beijing ready to apply steady pressure over issues of national sovereignty. Whether this amounts to an indirect challenge to the U.S. depends on how we calibrate our interests. For all I know, that calibration could very well favor China's hegemony – though I instinctively would doubt this conclusion.

The truth is, a game of diplomatic nudge-and-wink has existed in Southeast Asia for decades. The most recent crises have simply put the large backlog of multilateral hypocrisy to critical scrutiny. Yet the charade continues: Woe betide anyone decrying the Emperor's lack of clothes. Of course one sympathizes, to some extent. Residing in China's neighborhood and living with long bouts of American inattentiveness, especially from the Clinton Administration, does make for anxious moments, all the more so now that the once trumpeted "Asian Values" have fallen casualty to troubles after the financial crisis.

For the world's most successful developing-country association, all the hobgoblins have jumped out of the box at once, including: profound threats to Indonesia's national unity; difficult elite transitions; overall poor ASEAN group dynamics between the old "core group" and the new members; an emerging contrast between "speak-your-mind" democratic and more authoritarian regimes; residual economic problems; enormous manufacturing and energy industry over-capacity; miserable local governance, insistent localism, and demands for new ways to slice the patronage pie; China's broad and comprehensive emergence, including unanswered South China Sea provocations; the near-disappearance of sustained Japanese political and strategic leadership in Southeast Asia; the recurrence of high-profile ASEAN diplomatic failures and lingering intra-ASEAN disputes; and, most of all in the catalogue of multilateral failure, the disappointing performance of the ARF.

CONCLUSION. None in the region speaks of a crude Chinese hegemony, if that is what's in the making. Few Southeast Asian states exhibit any willingness to raise the alarm about China. Even the Philippines foreign ministry, by the end of the decade, had moved to temper earlier shrill warnings about Chinese intentions. Speaking of Bangkok's propensity to try to please Beijing, Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew once described the Thais as "bending even before the wind begins to blow." Meanwhile, Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid's state visit to Beijing in December 1999 showed that the ASEAN state most

ambivalent about a wide relationship with China may be making the necessary course adjustments.

Yet the longer term prospects of accepting Southeast Asia as lying within China's backyard may not please the states now grouped in a weaker, disunited, and less cohesive ASEAN. Nor do they hold any appeal for Taiwan, Japan, Australia, and the United States. The passing of Southeast Asia's regional order, if it means a permanent diminution of regional cohesion and even minimal purposefulness, is going to make it a lot harder for any new U.S. Administration trying to repair America's Asia policy.

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