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Why ASEAN is here to stay and what that means for the US by Satu Limaye

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In the wake of President Barack Obama's final attendance at the ASEAN-led East Asia Summit (EAS) in Vientiane, Laos, it is a good time to take stock of ASEAN's imperfections, ability to endure, and utility to the United States. Especially in the US, commentary has concentrated on ASEAN's inability to forge consensus on the South China Sea (SCS).

The more puzzling question, however, is why observers should expect 10 disparate countries with widely divergent interests on the SCS to have a unified position. We need to avoid "ASEANology" (the parsing of each ASEAN gathering's developments and communiqués regarding the SCS) and focus more on ASEAN's fundamental shortcomings, how it is likely to endure despite them, and its utility to US interests in Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific.

ASEAN has been from the beginning a top-down, government-led project with three objectives: consolidate state and/or regime dominance; prevent intrusions on sovereignty; and maintain strategic autonomy. As ASEAN approaches its 50th anniversary in 2017, these fundamentals have not changed—even though the adoption of the ASEAN Charter with its three pillars of economic, political-security, and socio-cultural community has created a new superstructure. ASEAN is not an "either or" project: It is a balance on a continuum between "inter-governmental ASEAN" and "community ASEAN." Today the balance is weighted overwhelmingly in favor of state and regime-led inter-governmental ASEAN while an "aspirational" community ASEAN takes very slow shape.

ASEAN faces numerous fundamental challenges. First, ongoing nation and state-building of each member country is far from over. A case can be made that ASEAN member countries are more solid than after post-colonial independence. But ethnic, subnational, minority, and other demands from below continue to challenge national resiliency, and in some places may be getting worse than they have been in decades. The net effect of these difficulties on ASEAN is to work against "community ASEAN" in favor of a focus at home—hence buttressing inter-governmental ASEAN.

A second challenge for ASEAN is the wavering commitment of elites. The "founders generation" is gone; and current and emerging elites may have less of the commitment and more countervailing pressures against the ASEAN community project as they deal with precarious domestic developments and an increasingly contested regional security environment. No doubt these elites find ASEAN useful for its core objectives (i.e., state/regime consolidation; preventing intrusions on sovereignty and strategic autonomy), but may have less bandwidth for and stake in the community aspirations of ASEAN. A less cohesive, less secure elite across the region is already visible.

A third challenge for ASEAN is the recalibration of power and relations (partnerships and dissonances) among its members. Power and relations are naturally shifting, but developments over the past few years suggest a trajectory in which key countries in ASEAN such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines are giving less emphasis to ASEAN in the toolbox of their regional and geostrategic management. Each of these capitals has a complex calculation about the degree and scope of commitment to ASEAN, but it is difficult to see a renewed reliance on ASEAN that founders from these countries had (Vietnam of course was a late addition, but its decision makers then clearly saw it as supporting international normalization and domestic *doi moi*).

A fourth fundamental challenge is that ASEAN's long-held geopolitical orientation is being threatened by emerging realities. ASEAN's prevailing geopolitical orientation has been to: invite internationalization through engaging multiple external players to support national and regional resilience; cultivate multi-polarity so as to bolster strategic autonomy; and avoid becoming embroiled in great power competition by carefully calculating and adjusting to shifts in the distribution of power.

This orientation is trickier as the contest for power, order, and relations across the region heats up. ASEAN reaps benefits by inviting international players, but it is also now strategically exposed to their increasing disputes. ASEAN had enough trouble in the Cold War bipolar structure; ASEAN's new strategic environment is making it play geopolitical *Twister*. ASEAN also has tried to manage great power relations by claiming centrality as the convenor or "actor" of ASEAN-led groupings such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Defense Minister Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus). Now, with increased great power strategic contestation, ASEAN may be becoming more of an "arena" than a regulator. Being a platform offers insufficient protection for ASEAN from jostling great powers; the latter have other platforms for pursuing their relationships.

So, given these fundamental difficulties facing ASEAN, why does it endure and of what utility is it to the United States? First, ASEAN persists because ASEAN member governments share a consensus that its core aims are useful. This consensus hasn't broken, and it is highly unlikely to. And

if it does, the factors that contributed to it will be sufficiently cataclysmic that ASEAN won't matter.

Second, US acquiescence in the ASEAN project by signing the charter, appointing a permanent ambassador, and becoming a member of EAS has buttressed ASEAN's default expectation and support for U.S. regional engagement. Sure, Washington has sought to shape and direct ASEAN-led architecture by calling for specific roles, issues, and ways of conducting business, but it has not ignored or sought to overthrow the ASEAN project. And by being involved, Washington has avoided being sidelined.

Third, no acceptable alternative to ASEAN and ASEAN-led architecture has developed. Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's Asia-Pacific Community idea did not take root; ex-Japanese premier Hatoyama Yukio's East Asian Community never materialized; and the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) hit the rocks of contested Northeast Asian relations. The lack of these alternatives, two of which explicitly do not include the United States, is good for Washington too. In fact, NEA's competing initiatives and efforts have sought to appeal to and provide benefits (e.g., infrastructure) to ASEAN rather than *against* ASEAN. In an analogue with constructively critical U.S. support to ASEAN, Northeast Asian competition to woo ASEAN has had the net effect of shoring up ASEAN centrality —and its role in the connected Northeast Asian production and supply network.

A fourth reason that ASEAN persists is that its centrality is claimed and located primarily in the political-security organizations—ARF, EAS, and ADMM—not in the economic groupings such as APEC, "One Belt, One Road," the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Trans-Pacific Partnership, or in reality even in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Again, the core locus of ASEAN centrality—the diplomatic dimension—is "protected."

Fifth and lastly, precisely because great power contestation is increasing, countries are reaching out to ASEAN as a grouping and member countries rather than rejecting or recreating the organization.

Under a reasonable scenario of enduring ASEAN and ASEAN-led groupings, the United States has many usable interests. First, continuing to support ASEAN demonstrates and institutionalizes U.S. commitment and presence—and at a very low cost. Second, continuing to push the aspirational and integrated ASEAN project makes sense for U.S. business and commerce. Third, ASEAN offers a platform to articulate US-backed rules, norms and values. Fourth, the United States cannot afford not to be in ASEAN and its associated organizations. Unlike the Asian Development Bank and AIIB, which are narrowly functional, ASEAN and its offshoots engage the broadest issues of peace, prosperity, and stability in the Asia-Pacific.

Finally, for the United States, ASEAN is not the starting point or end state of relations with Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific; bilateral alliances, partnerships, and relationships are. US support for ASEAN does not undermine this priority; rather it reinforces it. The health of bilateral relations with Southeast Asia are fundamental to US interests and blithely rejecting ASEAN and associated groupings because of frustration with its consensus on one issue such as the South China Sea would be unwise.

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