



QUEST OF ASEAN TO BE IN THE “DRIVER’S SEAT”

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Abstract

ASEAN has been the core to Southeast Asian regionalism ever since its inception in 1967 as a regional security organization. Despite it promoting external non-interference and giving way for “regional solution to regional problems”, the last two decades saw ASEAN allowing extra-regional powers through its multilateral initiatives, such as ARF, APT, EAS, etc. Besides, owing to the changing globalized world order, the organization has undergone transformation during the last two decades as economic in 1990s and community in 2000s. Assuming ASEAN to be one representing Southeast Asia, the post-Cold War era has seen its desire to be at the “leader’s chair” when it comes to multilateral frameworks concerning the region. All these happen despite the fact that the initiatives have certain overlapping agendas. The shift of ASEAN from its traditional bilateralism to multilateralism, on the way relaxing its reservation for external interference alongside its quest for “driver’s seat” serves an important area of study.

Key Words: ASEAN, Multilateralism, Driver’s Seat, ASEAN transformation, External interference.

INTRODUCTION

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been the core to Southeast Asian regionalism ever since its inception under Bangkok Declaration, 1967. Founding nations, like Indonesia and Malaysia have always promoted their “non-alignment” and the notion of “regional solution to regional problems” through the organization in the region, thereby giving hardly any space for external great powers’ interference. With the changing post-Cold War globalized world order and increasing interdependence between nations, the ASEAN felt the necessity to re-strategize in accordance with the need of the changing international order, choosing for an

extended cooperation as early as 1992 when dialogue on ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) took at forefront of ASEAN, ultimately establishing the same in 1993 and having its first meeting in 1994.

The ARF became then the first multilateral architecture in Southeast Asia, with ASEAN being at what is referred to as the “driver’s seat”. Later in 1997, ASEAN took the initiative of establishing ASEAN Plus Three (APT), which was formalized in 1999. The APT then helped ASEAN in retrieving its position post-1997-98 Asian Financial Crisis, thereby reaffirming ASEAN’s role as the driving force towards leading multilateral initiatives in the region. Transforming further, post-the financial crisis in 2003, ASEAN developed the idea of “community” vowing to establish under it ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), ASEAN Security Community (ASC) and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). Considering the importance of a wider cooperation and engagement, ASEAN again took the initiative of establishing East Asia Summit (EAS), which was formally launched in 2005 (as ASEAN + 6) after the decision taken in APT summit, 2004.

Traditionally, Southeast Asia follows bilateralism when it comes to having relationship or cooperation between countries. Besides, ASEAN has been instrumental in creating an environment conducive to openly professing its regional agenda of “One Southeast Asia” through its motto: “One Vision, One Identity, One Community”. Besides, the “ASEAN Way”- Consensus, Consultation and Cooperation (3Cs), provides for promoting its unique agenda of “regional solution to regional problems”. The region has so always been reserved of any great power’s interference. Now, with the coming in of other extra-regional powers through the multilateral initiatives that ASEAN has so far undertaken, it would be worth studying how ASEAN maintains the relationship within as well as with extra-regional powers in serving its purpose and being one driving.

It is therefore pertinent to study the evolving or transforming ASEAN, its desire of being the driving force and the reasons behind such. In this context, the paper tries to look at, understand and analyze the initial objective of ASEAN, its post-Cold War transformation and the reason why ASEAN has undergone such transformation and relaxation to external powers’ presence in the region. At the same time, the paper tries to study how ASEAN trades-off and balances the external presence in the region without hindering on its core purpose of serving the interest of the region.

ASEAN TRANSFORMATION

The paper tries so to study the evolving or transforming ASEAN, its desire of being the driving force and the reasons behind such. The paper tries to study how ASEAN trades-off and balances the external presence in the region without hindering on its core purpose of serving the interest of the region.

The evolution of the ASEAN has been continuous since its inception as a sub-regional organization of five “free-market non-communist” nations of the region, with others joining over different periods of time, Brunei joining in 1984. Communist Indochina and Myanmar under military junta were excluded during the period when the “ASEAN security perspectives were based upon Cold War realities”. The Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality

(ZOPFAN) promulgated in Kuala Lumpur Declaration, 1971 by non-aligned Indonesia and Malaysia and subsequent compromise with differing Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore's reliance on the US military presence further reaffirms the ASEAN way of dealing with the external superpower rivalry and military presence in the region. This further led the US to remove its military bases from the Philippines, mostly in 1992 and also making the presence a temporary. As the Cambodian conflict acted as stimulus for the "interactive processes" of the six ASEAN members then, Buszynski, L. (1992) opines that "the rule of consensus that governs groupings of sovereign states was firmly implanted in the ASEAN experience as a consequence of the Cambodian conflicts". This led to the ASEAN foregrounding rigidly its collective resilience over issues concerning the region.

There was an apprehension about ASEAN collapsing post-Cambodian conflict as the same was considered to be the one keeping the anti-communist founding nations together and intact. However, standing firm after the end of the conflict too, the ASEAN undergoes successful significant transformation and adjustment during the post-Cold War era, amending as well the basic organizational structure in the Singapore Summit, 1992. Proving wrong the apprehension, the organization becomes stronger and influential during the post-Conflict decades. Initiating several multilateral frameworks, despite overlapping agendas among them to serve the interests of the region, ASEAN stands tall today in international relations, benefiting from and balancing the great power's presence in the region. As Hwang, K. D. (2006) says "ASEAN attempted to revitalize the regional idea in such a way as to adapt itself to a new security environment of both geo-political and geo-economic shifts in the post-Cold War period". This however accelerated an outward orientation of managing internal security problems, rather than inward with ARF serving a case.

According to Acharya, A. (2000), Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia threatened regional security in Southeast Asia, rendering as well a renewed superpower rivalry after a brief *détente* during late 1960s. The heightened strategic rivalries between US-Soviet and Sino-Soviet along with that of Sino-Vietnamese impacted adversely upon the international relations of Southeast Asia and ASEAN's goal of a peaceful and non-interference regional order. Acharya, A. (2000) goes on to say that in a bid for reconciliation and peaceful regional order ASEAN marched in to close relations with the US and China compromising its stance of "regional solution to regional problems" with no external power's influence, thereby exposing its lack of capability in maintaining regional security order. Besides, managing "One Southeast Asia" becomes impeded by changing globalized geopolitical order with the end of Cold War and resurfacing of intra-mural tensions between the nations in 1990s, like bilateral territorial and resource disputes between Thai-Vietnamese, Vietnamese-Cambodian and Thai-Burmese; Malaysian-Indonesia over Aceh refugees' exodus to Malaysia; the Philippines-Malaysia over Moro separatists in Mindanao; Malaysia-Singapore over the Pedra Branca island; Malaysia-Thailand over border crossing rights; Malaysia-Brunei over the Limbang territory; along with the Malaysian and Indonesian suspicions over growing Chinese naval power with the inclusion of Vietnam extending ASEAN's diplomatic border right up to the frontier with China and common fear of Chinese policy in the South China Sea. The situation was further aggravated by the Asian Financial crisis, 1997-98 exposing the economic disparity and internal differences of Southeast Asia.

Alongside ASEAN members, including Malaysia and Indonesia who had espoused ZOPFAN, acknowledging for the US presence as a balancing act in the region; ASEAN in 1990s got closer interdependence and integration with the wider Indo-Pacific region, more so through APT¹. With economic and security modernization, ASEAN started to engage multilaterally as well, more so with ARF established in 1994, which however also signifies presence of external great powers' influence in the region. However, international relations of Southeast Asia has been transformed by post-cold war globalized geopolitical order, with its increasing links to the developments in the wider Indo-Pacific region and role of major powers, especially the US, China, Japan and India among others.

In Southeast Asia during the post-cold war era, there have been perceptions of Chinese hegemony with its outstanding economy and growth. On the security front as well, Chinese for long has been involved in overlapping claims of the region over South China Sea. The increasing influence and presence of China were so apprehensive of the ASEAN, besides other external superpowers trying to contain the same through various balancing acts forming different political, economic and security alliances with the members of the region. For instance, the US temporal military presence in the Philippines, bases in Thailand, Singapore; Malaysia's arms deals with UK, etc. The ASEAN which has been accustomed to bilateral negotiations in dealing and managing with such regional security shows flexibility embracing multilateralism of the ARF. Hwang, K. D. (2006) opines that "the flexible security diplomacy lets the ASEAN to utilize America's and China's intervention and support against Vietnam". Such flexibility could so be considered to be coming out of Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia.

ASEAN has diplomatically engaged with the presence of external powers in the region in its own terms. To its safeguard, the organization has rather chosen to be playing the leadership role in any multilateral initiatives concerning the region. ASEAN can so be considered using it wisely its shift from traditional bilateralism to multilateralism in the last two decades. The need for its economic and security advancements has led ASEAN to initiate APT, ARF and EAS, considering the importance the region has with the countries in the wider Indo-Pacific. The quest so of ASEAN to be in the "Driver's Seat" of such multilateral initiatives concerning the region can so be understood from the perspective of ASEAN's consciousness of the importance of engaging and developing cooperation with the wider Indo-Pacific in taking forward its economy and security, without as well compromising on the way the interests of the region.

ASEAN MULTILATERALISM

Multilateralism in the larger Indo-Pacific started to take the center-stage by late 1980s. During the time, Japan's huge investments and China's opening of market alongside four "Asian Tigers"², have made a huge difference in the regional economic worldview. This turn led to the region to emerge as the center of global interaction. By 1989, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) was established to serve the purpose of economic integration

¹ 10 ASEAN member countries plus Japan, China and South Korea

² The economies of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan, which underwent rapid industrialization and maintained exceptionally high growth rates (in excess of 7 percent a year) between the early 1960s (mid-1950s for Hong Kong) and 1990s.

and cooperation in the region. The common market was initiated by Japan, which however opted out later, in the interests of the west. While at the same time, Malaysia under Mahathir Mohamad was coming up with an idea of Southeast Asian grouping, which however never materialized. The shift in America's trade to Asia through the initiative in the 1990s from Europe or Atlanta garnered however mixed reactions from the countries in the region. Besides, ASEAN had reservations in the creation of APEC, fearing the same would lead to subsuming its interests in the region. Furthermore, the APEC's inability to help the devastating economy in the aftermath of the 1997-98 Asian Financial Crisis, led to countries losing faith in it.

The advent of post-Cold War globalized world order and increasing interdependence between nations have been consciously used by ASEAN in its own way of multilateral initiatives. The need of revisiting its regional security after the US' withdrawal from the bases in the Philippines in 1992, led to establishment of ARF as multilateral security initiatives in 1994. The regional economic vulnerability that ASEAN has become conscious of post-the 1997-98 Asian Financial Crisis, led to the establishment of APT understanding the importance that China, Japan and South Korea have in its economy. The APT was transformed under ASEAN initiative into EAS, first as ASEAN+6 in 2005, with the inclusion of India, Australia and New Zealand; and then as ASEAN+8, with the inclusion of the US and Russia in 2011.

The US' withdrawal from Clarke and Subic Bays in the Philippines in 1992 has triggered a debate on regional security in Southeast Asia, the flash-points being the North-Korean and South China Sea disputes, India's Look East Policy initiative, China's unpredictable behavior and India-China relation and its possible impact on the region. Japan, who was looking for an improved political relation did not let go of the situation and initiated for ARF. Japan succeeded in convincing subsequently the ASEAN to be in the "driver's seat", as ASEAN leaders thought the same would enhance its importance in international relations. China joined however, with conditions of not to bring up discussions in the forum of its border issues. Adopting three stages process- Confidence Building Measures (CBMs), Preventive diplomacy and Conflict Resolution; it was agreed in 1995 for ARF to effectively tackle security issues. ASEAN as the primary driving force of the ARF was stated in its concept paper published in 1995. ARF has twenty seven member states³.

While ASEAN was quite excited with ARF, the others were not investing their respective weights completely into making it successful multilateral architecture. In this context, according to realists, ARF lacked the necessary great power support to survive. Great powers extended only a limited support to the ARF, a main concern of its downfall. The institutionalists however feel the lack of collective will in dealing with issues confronting the region rendering it unsuccessful in the long run. However, it can be argued that, the ARF could not march long successfully because of various reasons. For instance, the US reluctance to abandon its dominant role, Singapore offering Changi Base to the US reluctant to leave the future of its security to the ARF, China and

³ 10 ASEAN member countries, 10 ASEAN Dialogue Partners (Australia, China, EU, the US, India, South Korea, Japan, New Zealand, Canada and Russia) and 7 other member countries (Bangladesh, North Korea, Mongolia, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Timor Leste and Sri Lanka).

Japan using the forum to rather enhance their own interests and to get closer to ASEAN countries, fear of great powers that successful ARF could raise the power of small countries at the cost of them, Northeast Asia issues which the ARF lacked capability to deal with, 1997-98 Asian Financial Crisis and dilution of the forum expanding its membership to everyone.

By 1995, Europe has realized the emerging Asia's economies, thereby giving forth for Asia-Europe Meeting (AEM), held in Singapore. However, differences cropped up with the meeting proposing to have other non-ASEAN members. Later in 1997, debate on APT was started under the initiative of ASEAN, subsequently formalizing in 1999. The APT was initiated by ASEAN emphasizing on Japan's investment to help regain ASEAN currency, as well as China's commitment to not further devalue its currency, so that Southeast Asia does not once again face a similar or kind of devastation that the 1997-98 Asian-Financial Crisis rendered. It can be understood here that, the APT was ASEAN's realization of the importance of Japan, South Korea and China to jointly represent Asia, with it leading the group, in dealing with Europe and economic issues across the region. This sub-regional grouping helped ASEAN then in retrieving its position post-the financial crisis, besides as well reaffirming its leading position.

By early 2000s, the ASEAN economy has recovered from the financial crisis. The post-crisis has seen China becoming an important economic player in the region, as largest trading partner in regional relations, despite being the region critical of China's presence. A new political and security transformation starts to emerge as well, with China finding space to assert its influence through the APT and increasing bilateral relations with countries of the region. Besides, the region has started to be skeptical of the US' role in the region. There has so been a perceptible shift in the economic relations, which Japan has felt the most in the region. The two groups- East Asia Study Group (EASG) and East Asia Vision Group (EAVG) created under the aegis of APT then started to talk of establishing East Asia Community, thereby the emergence of the idea of "Community" in the region. EASG then proposed for the idea of EAS, probably because Japan wanted bigger platform accommodating countries like India, while also keeping space for the US to join. The APT was limited to regional multilateralism and presence of India and the US would help in containing the influence of China in the region. Subsequently, ASEAN vowed in 2003 to establish AEC, ASC and ASCC. In 2004 at APT Summit, a proposal for EAS with ASEAN as the driving force was made, eventually formalizing in 2005 holding its first meeting at Laos. EAS initially had ASEAN+6⁴ members and later in 2011 with the joining of the US and Russia, it has become ASEAN+8.

The EAS works on six priority areas for promoting cooperation- Economic, Environment, Security, ASEAN Connectivity, Energy and Culture. Some of the initiatives taken as part of the priorities of cooperation are Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Master Plan for ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) and formal adoption of Nalanda University among others. RCEP provides for developing a comprehensive regional economic cooperation in not only trades, but also investments through developing a Comprehensive Free Trade

⁴ 10 ASEAN member countries and 6 other countries (China, South Korea, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and India)

Agreement. MPAC provides for connectivity within ASEAN and with outside promoting physical as well as people-to-people connectivity.

Becoming a member of the EAS needs one to accede to TAC undertaken by ASEAN in 1976 as part of its non-interference doctrine. This has also been the reason in delayed membership of the US and Russia. This condition on membership helps ASEAN in checking and enforcing its doctrine of 3Cs and non-interference for the functioning of the EAS, thereby giving significance to its leadership role in such a multilateral architecture. This helps so the ASEAN in balancing great powers' influence in the region. However, EAS envisioning East Asia Community requires greater economic cooperation and political comforts between the countries. There has been difference of opinion between China, which wants the APT to remain at the core of the EAS and Japan, who chooses for the EAS to be the major player. Nevertheless, the grouping has increased massively both intra- and inter-regional trades with the availability of expanding markets in East Asia, providing more opportunities as well for investing in the region.

CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

Southeast Asian nations mostly interconnected by sea-links geographically, despite its history of colonial occupation and newly independence states with economically and politically underdeveloped then, have in no time today constitute a region which is considered 'central' to world's economic and security affairs. The region has been credited for its fast economic development and prosperity, notwithstanding it being focal of conflicts during the Cold War era. The fastness with which the region achieved its regional integration and growth has during the post-Cold War era endowed it as an 'eye' for the great powers in international politics.

The post-Cold War era sees ASEAN going for integrating, engaging and cooperating with the wider Indo-Pacific and beyond, on the way relaxing its reservation for great powers' presence in Southeast Asia. Increasing interdependence between countries could have probably led to ASEAN choosing for going forward driving multilateral institutions. Going by institutionalists view, institutions play significant roles in reducing conflicts and increasing welfares by integrating countries. Besides, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), trades and technological transfers between countries today play an important role in mitigating conflicts, as one is dependent on others to achieve its growth and development. In East Asia, there has been shift in power rendering an increasing importance of countries like China, India and Japan, thereby redefining the roles of these regional powers, wherein extra-regional powers like the US had more to influence earlier. It is also to be seen how ASEAN responds Russia, who is a TAC partner, against the backdrop of present Russian aggressions in Ukraine. The crisis has created a complex geopolitical environment of the great powers with renewed focus on the future of Indo-Pacific.

ASEAN could well be using all these shifts in power relations to enhance its international relations as well as to augment its capacity in dealing with extra-regional powers, by reaching out its mechanism toward the wider Asia-

Pacific through its multilateral initiatives. However, such an outreach of ASEAN during the last two decades accommodating great powers in the region has nevertheless provided the great powers space for influence in the region. The consequent of such a shift in ASEAN principle could hinder its function within. For instance, ASEAN Summit 2012 ended with no resolution on Code of Conduct in South China Sea because of Cambodia's reluctance to vote against China, showing thereby the extent of China's control over the country.

Nevertheless, the ASEAN as the "driving force" has become a fundamental principle for its external relations with other non-ASEAN countries. This leadership is recognized by ASEAN countries as well as all non-ASEAN countries in the region, and becomes a guidance of regional economic architecture in East Asia. This successful economic cooperation model is a unique achievement in developing world. With the creation of AEC and negotiation of RCEP at the 21st ASEAN Summit held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in November 2012; ASEAN leadership in community building in the region has once again been reaffirmed. In the EAS in 2013, the Leaders, according to Hsu, K. (August, 2015) "reaffirmed ASEAN's central role in the EAS, and ASEAN's commitment to work in close partnership with all EAS participating countries, to ensure that the EAS would continue to be an important integral component of the regional architecture".

CONCLUSION

Since its inception, enhancing ASEAN's role and influence has been the core of ASEAN policy making. After ASEAN expanded regional cooperation with external parties, the "Driver's Seat" concept has played as a guiding principle. Internally, it is based on ASEAN unity and solidarity to enhance peace and ensure common interests of all ASEAN Member States. Externally, it is vital in its relations with Dialogue Partner countries, FTA partners and other external parties that wish to enhance engagements with ASEAN. The "Driver's Seat" principle ensures that ASEAN's interests are addressed in ASEAN-centric economic and security integration.

ASEAN's role as the "driving force" seems to be recognized by great powers, such as the US, China, Japan and India among others. The recognition can be considered as the functionality of the principle in the wider Asia-Pacific. However, the same principle seems to be challenging within and outside the ASEAN. Doubts and concerns emerge particularly when ASEAN enters into a new security climate and faces a rising China and other complicated security issues. People are also disappointed by ASEAN's failure to respond to a number of regional issues, such as the failure to handle territorial disputes in South China Sea. Besides, ASEAN's yet to fulfill ambitious project of three-pillared regional community will also test whether ASEAN is able to lead the mega initiative.

The ASEAN, whether it can remain in the "Driver's seat" while confronted with more powerful forces around it, will largely depend on the strength and determination of the leadership within ASEAN to play this role with swift and skillful diplomacy. ASEAN requires taking a similar leapt as did to prove wrong the apprehension of its collapse post-Vietnam-Cambodia conflict, so as to keep its leadership intact in today's changing global

geopolitics of the great powers. Nevertheless, the ASEAN now becomes much wider and multifunctional organization, besides becoming more influential and inclusive with all nations of Southeast Asia as its members. Besides, ASEAN plays a huge leadership role in its multilateral initiatives, thereby occupying an important space in international relations in the larger Indo-Pacific.

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