The ASEAN way and the changing security environment: navigating challenges to informality and centrality

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Abstract
As one of the more successful regional organisations in the world, ASEAN has been the driver of regional institution building in the Indo-Pacific. The key features in the ASEAN-led institutions are the informality of these arrangements and the stamp of the ASEAN way in regional processes dealing with security challenges. The article argues that despite changes in the strategic landscape with new challenges like the political crisis in Myanmar, an increasingly belligerent Chinese position on the South China Sea issue, heightened rivalry between the US and China, and a host of transborder non-traditional security threats, informality entrenched in ASEAN way remains the preferred modality in regional security governance. But while informality has had limited success in managing certain regional issues in the past, the pressure for ASEAN to recalibrate its informal processes and make the organization fit-for-purpose to deal with twenty-first century security challenges has become more urgent than ever.

Keywords ASEAN way · Centrality · Regional institution building · Security governance · Indo-Pacific

Introduction
The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been recognized as one of the most successful regional organisations in the world. Established in 1967 in a region described as the ‘Balkans of the East’, a group of small and medium-sized states, coming out from chequered history of post-colonial Southeast Asia, decided to work through an environment of enmity and distrust to form an organization to manage inter-state conflicts and promote regional economic and political cooperation.

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In the past 55 years, ASEAN’s record in maintaining regional peace and security through periods of consequential political transitions has drawn mixed responses. ASEAN has been viewed as a positive force for peaceful change not only by its ability to manage intra-mural relations, but more significantly, for its leadership in building a number of multilateral institutions that bring together a number of states in the wider Asia–Pacific region. These larger institutions include the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), East Asia Summit (EAS), and notable arrangements like the ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meetings (ADMM) and ADDM Plus to deal with regional economic and security challenges. A key feature in the ASEAN-led institutions is the informality and low levels of institutionalization of these arrangements. Absent formal structures like a Secretariat, the ARF, APT and the EAS are nonetheless established institutions defined by ASEAN-like set of informal processes geared towards addressing issues that threaten the peace, security and prosperity of Southeast Asia and the wider Asia–Pacific or Indo-Pacific Asian region. The success of ASEAN as an institution builder has earned it its ‘centrality’ in Asia’s regional security architecture.

The notion of ASEAN centrality, stacked against ASEAN’s characteristic informality, has drawn several criticisms from scholars and analysts from the realist and institutionalist schools of international relations that regard centrality as a mirage. Since its establishment as a regional organization, ASEAN’s lack of formal institutions, particularly legally binding agreements and mechanisms that ensure compliance and dispute settlements, is seen as hampering its ability to actually manage regional security and economic challenges (Jones and Smith 2006; Sato 2013; Kipgen 2018). Scholars who have been skeptical about the efficacy of ASEAN’s ascribed role as manager of regional order point to its lack of material power and thin institutionalization particularly the ASEAN-led institutions like the ARF and the EAS which do not have their own Secretariat (Nischalke 2002; Narine 2009). Others also challenge the process-driven and normative structure of ASEAN security community led by weak states (Leifer 1999; Jones and Jenne 2016; Emmerson 2020).

Pushing back against the mainstream institutionalist view are scholars and regional policy elites who argue that the lack of ‘formalised’ institutions does not reflect the absence of institutionalization in ASEAN. They argue that the long-entrenched practice of the ASEAN-way has served as its primary institution—reflecting the ‘rules of the game’ and providing the normative foundation that regulates the behaviour of members of the regional body (Acharya 2003; Alagappa 2003; Caballero-Anthony 2005). Most of these arguments emphasise the importance of regional context which is often overlooked by the positivist tradition of parsimony.

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1 Of late, the term Asia–Pacific has now been replaced by ‘Indo-Pacific’ to reflect the changing dynamics in the region and growing importance and influence of major powers. Other than the US and China, these would also include Japan, India and Australia.

2 Barry Buzan’s definition of ‘primary institutions’ as ‘durable and recognised patterns of shared practices rooted in values held commonly by members of …societies, embodying a mix of norms, rules and principles’ best fits this notion of institutions. See Buzan (2004, p. 181).
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Also ignored in the mainstream view that strong institutions are a prerequisite for regionalism is collective agency. As explained by former ASEAN Secretary General Rodolfo Severino, the Southeast Asian leaders chose not to emulate European model of integration, drawing instead on regional norms to go “the route of informality, eschewing legal formulations and legal binding commitments, avoiding elaborate regional, supranational institutions” (Severino 2006:4).

The preference for informality in dealing with political and security matters extends to ASEAN’s other goal of regional economic integration where flexibility has been a matter of deliberate choice, allowing national governments “sufficient autonomy in deciding which sectors to liberalise or reform and at what speed” (Nesadurai 2012). It is also a means to manage diversity and lack of capacity, accommodating differences while moving incrementally toward the goal of establishing a regional community. As argued by Marty Natalegawa, the former Foreign Minister of Indonesia, the push for a more rules-based organization “must not come at the expense of …ASEAN spirit” (Natalegawa 2018). He noted that it is “the preservation of the more traditional [informal] sense of solidarity that made possible ASEAN’s growth over the past decades (ibid: 60).

Notwithstanding the debates on formal and informal institutionalism, the rapid changes in the international environment have again raised questions about the effectiveness of ASEAN’s informal processes in the governance of regional security challenges, as well as the relevance and viability of ASEAN centrality. This article therefore sets to examine two key questions: first, why has the preference for informality and the ASEAN way persisted despite their growing limitations in addressing new types of transnational security threats and political crisis in the region? Second, how have these informal practices impacted ASEAN centrality given renewed threats from major power rivalry and the emergence of minilateral security arrangements like the US-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)?

Against these questions, the objectives of this article are two-fold. First, it revisits the evolution of ASEAN’s informal institutionalization as a regional organization whose main goal had been to manage intra-mural relations to maintain regional order and security. In doing so, it examines the rationale for the choice and adoption of informal processes and the extent to which such choices continue to define the nature of regional security governance. Second, the article scrutinizes the ability of ASEAN to mount credible responses to new kinds of security challenges and political crises confronting the organization as it ‘struggles’ to remain fit-for-purpose in a rapidly changing regional environment and hold on to its centrality in Asia’s security landscape.

The article argues that despite seemingly intractable problems like the ongoing political crisis in Myanmar, the threats posed by a belligerent China on the South China Sea issue, the heightened rivalry between the US and China, and a number of non-traditional security threats, the ASEAN way of informality and normative practices continue to serve the purpose of managing these security problems, albeit in a limited way. The adoption of the 2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific by states in East Asia for instance is a recent manifestation of this preferred mode of managing problems that include convening and providing critical platforms for consultation and dialogue on critical socio-economic and political-security issues; advancing
the norms of peaceful resolution of disputes and promoting cooperation and deepening regional integration without insisting on formalized structures (ASEAN 2019). The article further argues that while the ASEAN way retains its salience, ASEAN face greater pressures to recalibrate its informal processes and be better equipped to deal with twenty-first century security challenges.

The ASEAN-way revisited

From its inception, ASEAN has consciously refrained from building formal institutions to promote regionalism in Southeast Asia. One recalls that unlike the 1957 Treaty of Rome that formally established the European Union and laid down the legal foundations for the establishment of 3 institutional triangle: the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of Europe, ASEAN only had a two-paged document with 5 articles called the Bangkok Declaration. The Declaration was signed August 1967 and became the legal foundation for ASEAN’s existence. Despite its brevity, the Bangkok Declaration outlined the organisation’s modus operandi of “building on small steps, voluntary and informal arrangements towards more binding and institutionalised agreements.”

The feature of informality in ASEAN’s organizational structure and its association with the ‘ASEAN Way’ of doing things’ was clearly evident very early in its evolution as a regional body. ASEAN took almost a decade to establish its Secretariat in Jakarta, Indonesia in 1976 and another 4 more decades before the ASEAN Charter was drawn up and adopted in 2007. Ratified in 2008, the Charter finally provided ASEAN with a legally binding agreement that accords ASEAN the legal status of an inter-governmental organization. The Charter lays out ASEAN’s institutional structure and the decision-making processes; outlines the roles of the ASEAN Summit (comprising Heads of ASEAN governments) and the ASEAN Coordinating Council represented by the ASEAN foreign ministers; and defines the enhanced roles of the ASEAN Chair and the ASEAN Secretary-General in managing regional disputes. More significantly, the Charter codifies ASEAN’s norms, values and rules developed over time. As explained by Ong Keng Yong, a former Secretary-General of ASEAN, the importance of the codification of rules allows for greater institutional accountability and compliance system making ASEAN a more rules-based regional organisation (Caballero-Anthony 2008).

The Charter notwithstanding, questions as to whether informal modalities and/or the ASEAN-way was going to be replaced with a more formal structures were expeditiously clarified by members of the High Level Task Force that drafted the Charter in their published article which explained that the ASEAN-way was not going to be done away with. Instead, “[ASEAN way] will be supplemented by a new culture of adherence to rules … a culture of taking our obligations seriously … a system of compulsory dispute settlement for noncompliance that will apply to all ASEAN agreements” (Koh, et al 2007). Years after the Charter, however, the issue

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3 See History of ASEAN, https://asean.org/asean/about-asean/history/, accessed 27 March 2021.
of an ASEAN dispute settlement mechanism remains unresolved, and the ASEAN way remains the default mode of regional governance in Southeast Asia.

But what exactly is the ASEAN way? Much has been written about this characteristically ASEAN feature. Most scholars have referred to the ASEAN way as a set of norms and principles that regulate relations among members states. These norms include, but not limited to, informality, consultation and dialogue, consensus-building in decision-making processes, and peaceful settlement of disputes. ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) of 1976 sets out the normative framework for inter-state conduct founded on the principles of sovereignty, non-interference in domestic affairs of states, non-use of force and peaceful settlement of disputes, among others.

As a conflict management framework, Hoang and Caballero-Anthony, for instance, conceptualize the ASEAN way as a set of processes that emphasize self-restraint and accommodation of divergent interests in managing differences, accepting the cultural practices of musyawarah and muafakat (consultation and consensus), agreeing to disagree while shelving the need to settle differences. But while intra-regional differences had been managed mostly through these informal practices and norms, the ASEAN way does not preclude third-party mediation to settle bilateral disputes. A good example to this was the decision of Malaysia and Indonesia to go the International Court of Justice to settle their disputed sovereignty over the islands of Sipadan and Ligitan (Woon 2012).

Amitav Acharya, who takes a socio-constructive approach in the study of Southeast Asian regionalism, defines the ASEAN way as a set of norms and processes of identity-building, which ‘relies upon the conventional modern principles on inter-state relations, as well as traditional and culture specific modes of socialization and decision-making that is prevalent in Southeast Asia’ (Acharya 2009). According to Acharya, while the principles of inter-state relations like non-intervention, non-use of force can be regarded as legal-rational norms which are not unique to ASEAN, the socio-cultural practices of informality and consensus-building, non-adversarial, and non-hegemonic are what makes these typically ASEAN. Assiduously cultivated over the years, these norms have developed a degree of ‘stickiness’, robust enough to influence the behaviour of states within Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific region.

As a diplomatic and security culture, Jurgen Haacke similarly describes the ASEAN way as a ‘normative framework…in mediating disputes, guiding interaction and underpinning a process of identity construction’ (Haacke 2003). In brief, the ASEAN way is an integral part of the normative framework that has defined regional governance in terms of a set of processes and institutions, both largely informal and formal in maintaining peace and security in Southeast Asia and the wider region.

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4 For examples of several works that explain the “ASEAN Way”, see Anh (1996), Caballero-Anthony (1998), Amitav Acharya, Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), and Haacke (2003).

5 A practice traced to Javanese culture.
With informality and the ASEAN way seen as the defining features of ASEAN regionalism, several scholars have not only observed that ASEAN is ‘under-institutionalised’ but more significantly, questioned the ability of ASEAN to manage regional security (Jones and Smith 2006; Ba 2010; Sato 2013; Stubbs 2014). However, the observation of low institutionalization belies the fact that ASEAN has been driving institutional building in the Asia-Pacific with the web of multilateral institutions that it has founded from the early 1990s. From the largest 27-member ARF to the smaller 18-member EAS and 13-member ASEAN Plus Three, these institutions bear the distinctive feature of the ASEAN-way in their institutional design while adopting the practices of informality, habits of dialogue and consensus-driven processes in their engagements with one another. Notable also are the lack of formal structures that support these institutions such as having their own separate Secretariats. Instead, all their institutionalized meetings, activities and agreements are managed by and the coordinated under the single umbrella of the ASEAN Secretariat. Being at the centre of these institutions, ASEAN is able to drive these informal processes by convening and hosting the multiple meetings of these institutions and setting the agendas. The annual Summits of the APT and EAS, their ministerial meetings including that of the ARF’s are always held in the capitals of ASEAN countries, generating a lot of attention from the policy and academic communities, media and civil society organisations.

Despite significant changes in the regional security environment over the years, these ASEAN-led institutions have continued with their informal practices and consensus-driven processes informed by the ASEAN way. ASEAN’s ability to maintain informality while steering the agendas of these multilateral settings has much to do with the enduring usefulness and pragmatism of the ASEAN way in dealing with certain security problems. The ideational power of the ASEAN way had been demonstrated in the capacity of ASEAN to persuade extra-regional states that are members of these ASEAN-led institutions of its normative value in cultivating habits of dialogue, forging common interests and promoting cooperative security in the wider Indo-Pacific region. The ARF is a good case in point. Established in 1994 soon after the end of the Cold War, the main objective of the ARF then was to engage all the major powers, particularly a rising China and what appeared to be a disengaged United States that had withdrawn its military bases from the Philippines, by locking them in a set of regional multilateral processes. The logic then was to extend the ASEAN way of building trust and confidence by institutionalising habits of dialogue, consultation and consensus, while promoting the norms of non-use of force, non-interference and peaceful settlement of disputes in the wider Asia-Pacific region (Acharya 2009).

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6 The ARF has 27 members comprising the ten ASEAN states, plus its 10 dialogue partners (China, Japan, South Korea, US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Russia and the European Union), North Korea, Mongolia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Timor Lester, and one observer (Papua New Guinea). The EAS comprise the 10 ASEAN states and 8 dialogue partners—China, Japan, South Korea, India, US, Australia, New Zealand and Russia. The ASEAN Plus Three are the 10 ASEAN states with China, Japan and South Korea.
During that post-Cold war period of uncertainty when significant developments were taking place in China and the US, ASEAN’s motivation in driving efforts in the establishment of the ARF was its desire not to get caught in major power rivalry. ASEAN did not want to be seen as adopting the realist approach of ‘band wagoning’ and hedging against one major power over another. Instead, it presented itself as an ‘honest broker’ that promoted a more inclusive strategy of engaging all major powers and enmeshing them in a dense web of multilateral, informal processes that were aimed at fostering trust and building confidence among states in the wider region with different political and security concerns.

For many analysts from the realist school of international politics, the ASEAN strategy of engaging all major powers and eschewing ‘band wagoning’ and ‘hedging’ was unrealistic, given the grouping’s lack of material power. Established scholars like Michael Leifer, who described ASEAN as a diplomatic community whose remit was mostly maintaining cordial intramural relations, doubted the ability of small, weak states to manage the security of larger region characterized by major power rivalry (Leifer 1989, 1999). Some analysts were also skeptical about the ability of ASEAN states to socialize the large number of countries spanning a huge geographic footprint of the Indo-Pacific on its norms of inter-state conduct to achieve regional order (Jones and Smith 2006; Beeson 2009). More significantly, they questioned the extent to which norm socialization is adequate to address the kinds of security challenges facing the region.

But the thinking in ASEAN then, based on its own experience, was that it was critical to first achieve a ‘level of comfort’ among states with different political orientations and levels of economic development before any attempts at crafting formal institutions could be done. Thus, socializing states outside Southeast Asia with and through the informal processes and norms of the ASEAN way was deemed necessary. Further, the strategy of engaging and keeping as many major powers as possible in a web of multilateral processes, i.e. ‘omni-enmeshment’ was seen as one way of ‘balancing’ each other’s influence (Goh 2008).

The founding the ARF reflected ASEAN’s approach to regional security governance. From an inward-looking association dedicated to managing intra-mural differences and avoiding being involved in great power rivalry, ASEAN expanded its normative influence on the wider East-Asia and Asia–Pacific region. ASEAN’s objectives then and now remained constant—i.e., to continue to build trust and confidence and promote regional peace and cooperation though the institutionalization/internalization of norms like peaceful settlement of disputes and respect for sovereignty and non-interference, while promoting comprehensive and cooperative security. As observed by Amitav Acharya, despite the lack of material power, ASEAN has made an important contribution to Asia’s regional order in three ways: norms, socialization and identity building (Acharya 2021, see also Koga 2018). ASEAN’s collective agency in managing regional security through norm and institutional building resulted in the web of other regional frameworks and arrangements that followed which were not limited to political and security issues (these are discussed in the later section of this article). Such agency therefore has allowed ASEAN to be in the ‘driver-seat’ and become the fulcrum in institution building in the wider Asian region. This position is captured in the notion of ASEAN ‘centrality’.
ASEAN centrality

While the notion of ASEAN centrality is central to discussions of regional security governance, there is yet to be a clear definition of what ASEAN centrality is nor clear direction of what it should be. As indicated above, ASEAN centrality as its most basic connotes a sense of ASEAN ‘centredness’—being at the core of regional political deliberations and security arrangements. The achievements of ASEAN in building multilateral institutions and promoting inclusive and ‘open regionalism’ in the late 1990s to early 2000s have lent visibility to ASEAN ‘centrality’ (He 2019). Yet, as Acharya noted, what this entails in practical terms remains unclear (Acharya 2017).

From available literature, ASEAN centrality can take five forms. The first form is regional leadership in the sense that ASEAN has assumed the role of leading regional states towards greater institutionalization and diplomatic cohesion (Tan 2017). The second is regional convenor or facilitator with ASEAN presenting itself as an honest broker and providing a neutral ‘meeting place’ for multilateral meetings, dialogues and events that brings together big, middle and smaller states in the region. The third form of centrality is regional hub with ASEAN assuming the prime node in Asia’s regional architecture, ensuring that it would not be marginalized by other emerging regional arrangements (Caballero-Anthony 2014). ASEAN centrality is most manifest in its deep enmeshment in a variety of regional mechanisms and social networks (Ibid). Such a role has also facilitated the relevance of ASEAN as an economic bloc to forge economic arrangements with other extra-regional states. The fourth form is being the regional driver of progress with ASEAN providing momentum for implementing its stated goals and commitments such as the establishment of the 3 pillars of the ASEAN community, creating roadmaps and milestones to be reached such as the Three Pillars of the ASEAN Community. And the fifth form is that of regional convenience in the sense that ASEAN is a strategic convenience—providing the most accessible and acceptable platform for advancing multilateral cooperation in Asia (Tan, ibid).

In essence, ASEAN centrality is its strategic position in the dense web of institutionalized networks that includes the so-called alphabet soup of multilateral institutions such as the ARF, APT, EAS, ADMM and ADDM+. This position allows ASEAN to be in the ‘driver-seat’ and the fulcrum in the regional processes and institution building in the Asia–Pacific. (Caballero-Anthony 2014). More significantly, this centrality is achieved in spite of ASEAN’s informality. In this regard, ASEAN’s informality helps its centrality by providing flexibility and avoiding rigidity and hard commitments. Important also to ASEAN member states and other extra-regional states that belong to these ASEAN-led institutions is the fact that informality is non-threatening—a critical element in protecting their sovereignty and interests. At the

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7 Multilateralism 1.0 was conceived as ASEAN-centric, such as the once welcomed ASEAN Regional Forum, while Multilateralism 2.0, after the global financial crisis, is extra-ASEAN, from BRI to Quad. See He (2019).
same time, this informality allows ASEAN to be nimble in crafting new institutions and mechanisms to respond to different kinds of regional challenges.

What makes ASEAN’s centrality unique is the tacit acceptance/endorsement of the major powers in the region. While this acceptance is arguably perfunctory at best, both the US and China, as well as the other regional powers like Japan, Russia, India, and Australia have formally recognised this principle in their respective official statements and communiques. In practice, what this means is that they agree that ASEAN ‘drives’ the informal processes of regional cooperation. This has also meant that no outside power—be it China, Japan, the US or Australia should develop regional institutions without going through ASEAN or that competes with ASEAN-led institutions. A good example to this is Japan and Australia’s proposal of an Asia Pacific Community (APC) in 2000 which was met with strong reservations from ASEAN. Consequently, the APC initiative idea did not take off although after a few years, the idea was “replaced” with the establishment of an ASEAN-initiated EAS in 2005.

That said, the concerns about the viability of the ASEAN way also extends to ASEAN centrality and its credibility in managing regional security. More significantly also are the questions on whether ASEAN centrality is effective against more intense major power competition in Asia, and whether centrality can adequately deal with new kinds of challenges and still make ASEAN fit for purpose (Lee 2010; Jones and Jenne 2016).

Navigating informality and ASEAN centrality

ASEAN’s experience as the first mover in regional institution building came at a time when the grouping was at its zenith, having achieved a number of accomplishments, including coming out intact after of a tumultuous period triggered by the Asian financial crisis (AFC) and the other crises that followed. These crises are discussed briefly below.

Coming out of the Asian financial crisis

The Asian Financial Crisis (AFC) in 1997–1998 has been regarded by many scholars and analysts as a watershed in Southeast Asian regionalism. Coming soon after the expansion of ASEAN membership with the joining of Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar and thus completing the vision of a 10-member organization, ASEAN was badly shaken by a severe economic recession that started from a financial crisis. The economic crisis spiraled into a social, political and security crises which, at its worst, saw the downfall of ASEAN’s longest serving leader-Indonesia’s President Suharto. The AFC and its aftermath caught ASEAN by surprise. Unprepared and ill-equipped to deal with an economic contagion, ASEAN was roundly criticized for its inability to respond urgently and effectively to the crisis (Caballero-Anthony 2005). To make matters worse, a humanitarian crisis broke out in East Timor in 1999 when a spate of violence wrecked several parts of the territory, following the
referendum that decided its independence from Indonesia. Constrained by its norms of non-intervention and respect for sovereignty, ASEAN found itself helpless to respond to an escalating humanitarian crisis in its neighbourhood. ASEAN found itself ill-equipped to deal with the kinds of crises that required institutional capacity, resources, and specialized expertise. This led some observers to brand ASEAN as a sunset organization (Ruland 1999; Henderson 1999; Garofano 1999).

The AFC and the other crises were tipping points for ASEAN states to seriously assess their capacities to respond to regional challenges. One of its first significant move was to work with China, South Korea and Japan to form the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) in 1999. A major policy initiative of the APT establish the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI)—a multilateral financial instrument aimed at enhancing liquidity arrangements for the economies in the region and avert future financial crisis. The CMI is also a regional mechanism to promote local currency bond market. Moreover, acutely aware of its severe limitations in dealing with transborder problems, ASEAN officials began to work on developing the idea of establishing a 3-pillared ASEAN Community to build regional capacity.

Bali Concord II

The Bali Concord II, which was adopted in 2003, outlined the organisation’s vision of establishing an ASEAN Community by 2015, nested on three-pillars of: ASEAN Political–security Community (APSC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) (Bali Concord II, ASEAN 2012). The overarching goal of establishing this 3-pillared Community was to ensure “durable peace, stability and shared prosperity in the region by creating several regional frameworks and mechanisms that were geared to make the Community—“rules based with shared values and norms… with shared responsibility for comprehensive security and a dynamic and outward-looking region in an increasingly integrated and interdependent world” (ASEAN Secretariat, APSC Blueprint 2009).

The APSC, which was initially conceptualized as the ASEAN Security Community (ASC), generated quite a lot of attention given its declared objective of providing a regional framework for member states to handle security threats more effectively, and the raise the level of security cooperation to a higher place. Realising that most security issues in the region were now transnational, there was increasing realization among ASEAN member states that these challenges could no longer be addressed alone, and nor was it enough to rely predominantly on the prevailing mode of bilateral arrangements or on international forums for dispute settlement among its

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8 Since its establishment in 2000, CMI has been transformed to become Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralisation (CMIM) in 2010, which is a multilateral financial arrangement among the ASEAN+3 and the Hong Kong Monetary Authority. The aim is to provide financial support through currency swap transactions among its parties. The current CMIM fund stands at USD 240 billion.

9 The ASC was first introduced by Indonesia during its Chairmanship of ASEAN in 2003 and had since been reframed as the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) in 2009.
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members. In short, the ASC was “meant to provide a sense of purpose, a practical goal, and a future condition that all [ASEAN] members should strive for”. 10

Transformed into the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC) in 2009, the initiatives and proposed mechanisms within the APSC are notably different from ASEAN’s usual process-oriented, confidence-building modalities. Most of its initiatives are geared to resolve problems and achieve results. These involve, among other things, the sharing of information in areas like intelligence sharing for counter-terrorism, identifying hotspots for sources of forest fires and controlling environmental pollution (haze), creating mechanisms for regional surveillance systems and information sharing on outbreaks of infectious diseases, and creating a regional centre for the coordination of relief and assistance in natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies. It also involved crafting coordinated responses in dealing with maritime crimes like piracy and harmonizing legal frameworks in order to address other transnational crimes like human trafficking. 11 While the progress is uneven, with some sectors moving faster than others, what is evident in the on-going, albeit incremental, institutionalism are the efforts to ‘re-tool’ ASEAN in order to make it more responsive and effective in dealing with more complex transboundary challenges.

Meanwhile, cooperation in the ASEAN defence sector has grown steadily since the establishment of ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meeting (ADMM) in 2005, particularly in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) through annual ARDEX exercises. 12 In 2007, the ADMM also developed the ADMM-Plus which is a platform for ASEAN and its eight Dialogue Partners to strengthen security and defence cooperation. Since its establishment in 2010, the ADMM-Plus has made significant strides in facilitating strategic dialogue between defence officials as well as practical cooperation between militaries. This has helped to build confidence and improve relations, as well as promote stable military-to-military ties in the region (ASEAN Secretariat ADMM 2014). Nonetheless, in spite of these mechanisms created to respond to new challenges, elements of informality and less rigid structures remained, assuring member states that their sovereignty would not be eroded and there would be no interference in their domestic affairs.

**ASEAN economic community (AEC)**

Economic security was always considered as a solid foundation to regional security and the idea of deepening economic cooperation has been a constant goal of ASEAN since its founding. In 2002, former Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong broached the idea establishing an AEC to forge even deeper economic integration within ASEAN. The AEC is an ambitious project that sets to deliver ‘a stable,

10 This framing was proposed in the concept paper of ASC introduced by Indonesia. See “Indonesia proposing ASEAN security community concept”, Jakarta Post, 16 June 2003. Accessed from: http://www.thejakartapost.com.
11 The ASEAN Convention on Trafficking in Persons was adopted in 2015.
12 ARDEX exercises are cover disaster response, including search and rescue. These are meant to improve inter-operability in joint/coordinated HADR exercises.
prosperous and highly competitive ASEAN economic region in which there is a free flow of goods, services, investment and a frer flow of capital, equitable economic development and reduced poverty and socio-economic disparities in the year 2020’. These were to be achieved by making ASEAN a ‘single market and production base’ and a ‘more dynamic and stronger segment of the global supply chain’ (Declaration of ASEAN Concord II, 7 October 2003). At the 12th ASEAN Summit in January 2007, ASEAN agreed to advance the establishment of the AEC from 2020 to 2015.

The push for an AEC was seen as a strategic means to help ASEAN members face economic uncertainties in changing global environment by facilitating a bigger market space for its 600 + million people to attract FDI, and to play the role of a ‘hub’ in the larger Asian region. As observed by Basu Das, AEC’s achievement could already be seen in the increasing level of FDIs received by ASEAN states. Part of this strategy was to establish more ASEAN + 1 FTAs with other countries outside Southeast Asea and to strengthen ASEAN’s collective negotiating positions (Basu Das et al. 2013). In 2012, ASEAN announced the formation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) as another means to further integrate the region to the wider global economy.

RCEP

After 8 years of negotiation, RCEP was signed on 15 November 2020 which brings together the ten ASEAN member states, China, Japan, Korea, Australia and New Zealand into one trade agreement. The main objectives of RCEP are to establish a comprehensive and high quality FTA that expands trade and investment liberalization and forge closer economic integration between ASEAN and its major trading partners. RCEP can be a platform to strengthen global supply chains and strengthen supply linkages between ASEAN and China, Korea and Japan.

The conclusion of RCEP is very significant for a number of reasons. First, is the fact that this is the first time China, Japan and Korea have come together in a free trade agreement. An East Asian wide FTA has long been a desired goal for the East Asia region but because of historical baggage, it is politically unacceptable for Japan and China (competitive rivals) to take the lead. RCEP has to be brokered in 2012 by a more “neutral party” such as ASEAN to also include Australia, New Zealand and India (which backed out of the trade deal at the last minute). As noted by Peter Petri, RCEP is a triumph for ASEAN’s middle-power diplomacy (Petri and Plummer 2020).

Second, RCEP is now the world’s largest FTA accounting for 30% of global GDP and covering 2.2 billion people. RCEP’s relatively user friendly rules of origin and other trade rules will help boost trade and investment and revive global value chains that have been disrupted/affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a study by Peter Petri and Michael Plummer, RCEP could add $209 billion annually to world income and $500 billion to world trade by 2030 (Petri and Plummer 2020).

Third, RCEP provides the flexibility for ASEAN countries, unlike the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) which is
seen as a more exclusive FTA. As a more inclusive FTA, RCEP is able to accommodate a diverse range of countries at different stages of economic development. It has provisions for special and differential treatment for Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam, as well as built-in technical cooperation and capacity building elements to support the implementation of trade commitments by its less developed members. Although RCEP is a legally binding FTA, the processes of accommodating diversity and imbedded flexibility move it away from privileging formality. Finally, RCEP is an ASEAN-led free trade pact. It was ASEAN that formulated the principles to guide the negotiation process forward with its major trading partners. Thus, the successful conclusion and signing of the RCEP agreement reinforces “ASEAN-centrality” and its economic integration efforts. Arguably, without ASEAN centrality, RCEP would not have been feasible.

**Bali Concord III: ASEAN community in a global community of nations**

Although the principle of ASEAN’s centrality was already embedded in the regional institution building and processes in East Asia, it was in 2011 when the dynamics of this centrality came into full play when the US and Russia joined the EAS as new members. Established in 2005, the EAS was seen as an expanded APT with Australia, New Zealand and India as additional members. India’s membership was particularly interesting as this was regarded as ASEAN’s attempt to manage growing concerns about an increasingly assertive China and avoid the impression that the APT was being driven by China (Caballero-Anthony 2014). And, in keeping with ASEAN’s approach of inclusive regionalism, it kept the door open for the US and Russia to eventually join the EAS.

ASEAN however made accession to its Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) as requirement for EAS membership. The US has earlier shown its wariness in being tied to any regional treaty, particularly one that eschews the use of force in settling disputes. It was therefore a major boost for ASEAN to have the United States and Russia sign the TAC. The so-called ‘TAC-isation of the EAS’ was another significant milestone in ASEAN’s ability to enmesh the major powers in its normative framework. The EAS in 2011 was therefore seen as the culmination of ASEAN’s centrality in regional institutional building in the Asia–Pacific (Caballero-Anthony Ibid).

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13 CPTPP is considered a highly sophisticated FTA that covers issues such as digital trade, labour and environmental standards and dives deeper into regulatory issues. CPTPP is more suitable for advanced economies and is structured as a next generation FTA.

14 Unlike the ARF whose highest meetings is at ministerial level, the EAS is a leaders-led institution that convenes annual Summits among the 18 heads of government/states in the Asia–Pacific.
ASEAN centrality challenged

Although the notion of ASEAN centrality is now part of the lexicon of regionalism and multilateralism in the region, as noted above there are questions about the ability of ASEAN to maintain this status in a significantly different Indo-Pacific region. These concerns arise from several factors and among these are: (1) heightened power competition between the US and China, (2) China’s increasingly aggressive behaviour in the South China, and (3) fraying unity within ASEAN members.

Navigating power transitions

As discussed above, ASEAN’s biggest assets have been its institutions. The ARF, APT, EAS, as well economic frameworks like the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) have served as important pillars of regional security, stability, and prosperity. Informal as some of these arrangements are, they continue to build trust and confidence and enhance relations among regional states—the key foundations of the ASEAN way to regional peace and security. But carefully navigating US–China relations has also been another element of its security calculus. While US is seen as a resident power in Asia, China on the other hand is a ‘reality on ASEAN’s doorstep’. It is important therefore for ASEAN to cultivate good relations with both sides.

Consistent with its posture of being an “honest broker”, ASEAN has remained largely as a bystander amid the sharpening tensions between the US and China, despite having the ARF and EAS. In the last two decades, China has become not only the second biggest economy in the world but also the most important economic partner and major investor in ASEAN and the wider Indo-Pacific region. In 2003, China accounted for just 4 per cent of global GDP; today, it makes up close to 20 per cent. China’s Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and its Belt and Road Initiative has filled in a huge gap in financing many infrastructure projects in the region. With its growing economic influence, China has also become more assertive—militarily and diplomatically.

How the US responds to a more powerful and confident China is a test of its ability to hold on to its hegemonic position particularly at a time when US–China relations have been fractious. ASEAN would not want to be caught in the Thucydides Trap, a term used by political analyst Graham Allison to refer to the hegemon’s fear of a rising power triggering competition, ultimately leading to confrontation, even war. In two consecutive issues of Foreign Affairs, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong wrote about ‘The Endangered Asian Century’, raising serious concerns about US–China confrontation and the implications for Asia’s future (Lee 2020). Similarly, former Australian Prime Minister (and also a former Foreign Minister) Kevin Rudd raised concerns about possibility of armed conflict between the US and China and a new Cold War 1.5 (Rudd 2020). These concerns stem not only from China’s increasing aggression but also a hardening of the US position that rejects the international legal validity of China’s maritime claims and actions in the area.
The ramping-up of US air and maritime operations in the South China Sea have raised temperatures, increasing the risk of escalation into conflict.

**China’s Belligerence in the South China sea**

The territorial disputes in the South China are serious threats to the security and stability in the Indo-Pacific. The Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Vietnam have disputed territorial claims with China which claims sovereignty over the entire South China sea. Despite the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China (DOC) which provides the framework for managing disputes between China and the ASEAN claimant states, Beijing has been audaciously going ahead with building structures in the dispute areas to stamp its claims. Chinese fishing and coastguard vessels also constantly stray into the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of ASEAN claimant states. In April 2020, for instance, China unilaterally established two new administrative districts in the contested Paracel and Spratly Islands (South China Morning Post, 20 April 2020).

It is interesting to note that in a recent survey on ASEAN’s perceptions and attitudes toward China published by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in 2020, China has come out as the least trusted of ASEAN’s dialogue partners (Tang et al. 2020). This is despite its economic ties with the region, its demonstrated ability to provide public goods through the Belt and Road Initiative, and its declaration of a ‘grow with us’ geo-economic strategy.

While ASEAN has serious concerns over China’s behaviour, it has also been witnessing the perceived inconsistency of US commitment to ASEAN in particular, and to multilateralism in general. ASEAN, for example, regards the poor attendance of the US leaders in the ASEAN-US Summit and the EAS during the two previous administrations as reflective of this inconsistency. While ASEAN recognizes the criticality of US leadership to regional and global security, the decision of former President Trump to withdraw from international commitments such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Paris climate change agreement, and the Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), as foreboding of things to come. These developments have only served to fuel questions about the reliability of the US as a serious partner in promoting multilateralism. ASEAN therefore hopes that the new Biden administration could reset US policy on Asia to deepen its engagement with the region.

**Fraying ASEAN unity**

Increasingly since 2012, ASEAN members have been confronted with the challenge of staying united in the face of regional challenges. One of the consequential issues that caused a crack in ASEAN unity was its position on Chinese interference in the 2012 ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting. For the first time in its 45-year history, ASEAN failed to issue a joint communiqué due to disagreement among members over references to the South China Sea. Cambodia, the Chair of ASEAN in that year, refused to agree to make references to China’s incursions in the Scarborough Shoal.
and EEZs upon instructions from China (Bower 2012). In a statement issued follow-
ing the non-issuance of the communique, Singapore’s Foreign Minister warned
that ASEAN’s failure to have a joint statement reflected “disunity within ASEAN”
(Singapore MFA 2012). Although there had been push back against China in the
subsequent years and more efforts given to forging common positions despite Bei-
ing’s overt influence on Cambodia and Laos, it was increasingly evident that China
has succeeded in driving a wedge among ASEAN members (Parameswaran 2016;
Sutter and Huang 2012).

The other difficult issue that has caused open fissures in ASEAN is the ongo-
ing crisis in Myanmar following the military coup on 1 February 2021 that wrested
power from the newly elected National League of Democracy (NLD) government.
Not only did the unconstitutional act go against the principles of the APSC, but the
atrocities committed by the military in shooting and killing people who were and are
continuing to protest against the coup presented several dilemmas on how ASEAN
should respond. The Myanmar crisis is deeply relevant to ASEAN and its modus
vivendi of regional peace, but it remains to be seen whether ASEAN can do much
for Myanmar. As aforementioned, the ASEAN way protects state sovereignty as a
regional norm through non-interference and consensus. ASEAN has done little to
address domestic issues of regional concern, understood as ‘internal’ or ‘bilateral
affairs’, including those of similar nature to the current crisis, such as the Thailand
2014 military coup or the Cambodia-Thailand 2011 border conflict. These events
undermine the limited credibility there is for ASEAN centrality.

Nevertheless, the stakes are much higher this time with an internationally lauded
(though equally contentious) democratic leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, being impris-
one and a worsening humanitarian crisis. The crisis seriously undermines ASEAN
credibility and relevance in keeping regional peace and democratic commitments
(Ryu et al. 2021). Furthermore, the Tatmadaw (Myanmar’s military) represents a
regional security weak point as it deepens its dependence on China for military and
economic ties, which risks weakening ASEAN centrality externally (The Financial
Times 2021). The perceived willingness of the current ASEAN chair, Cambodia to
cosy up to the Tatmadaw and Thailand’s military junta’s affinity with its Burmese
counterpart are illustrative of the risks to ASEAN centrality posed by the crisis
(Munir Majid 2022).

Facing intense international scrutiny and pressures from their own people,
ASEAN agreed to a modest but unprecedented Five Point Consensus and barred the
military junta from attending the ASEAN summit. These moves have demonstrated
some ASEAN unity in face of the Myanmar crisis, which seems to endure even as
the Tatmadaw stonewalls progress by ASEAN (Jaipragas 2022). To date, more than
1500 people have already been killed, hundreds more wounded, and more than 8000
people arrested (Reuters 1 Feb 2022). Still, deeply entrenched habits of non-interfer-
ence continue to preclude stronger responses. ASEAN is therefore facing increased

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15 Among ASEAN members, Cambodia and the Philippines in the Duterte administration have been
seen as openly deferential to China at the expense of preventing ASEAN to issue more robust statements
about China’s incursions in the South China sea.
pressures to ensure ASEAN internal centrality by taking more stringent actions, such as suspending the membership of Myanmar under the military junta, but also establishing timely humanitarian efforts to help its people.

Re-imagining ASEAN centrality

ASEAN centrality is now at a crossroad. To be sure, the time has come for ASEAN need to seriously re-think whether its normative frameworks and informal processes are still fit-for-purpose in the new security environment. The late ASEAN Secretary-General, Surin Pitsuwan, who served in 2007–2012, had often argued for an ASEAN centrality of ‘substance beyond form’. At the 50th anniversary of ASEAN, he noted that ‘the world is a different place now, and ASEAN has to rise to the challenge. ASEAN will have to make some adjustments.” (Bangkok Post, 15 Feb 2017).

To those that argue that ASEAN’s informal processes and the ASEAN way still matter in building better intra and inter-state relations (Natalegawa 2018), they would also say that ASEAN can no longer be content to only be the convener of meetings. Nonetheless, as Natalegawa pointed out, efficiency cannot come at the expense of “eroding a sense of common ownership and participation that comes with the more laborious ‘consensus-based approach” (Natalegawa 2018:60). Clearly, the time has come for some changes to happen but to what extent and how fast are questions that need to be faced head on.

As the driver of regional institution building in Indo-Pacific, it will do well for ASEAN to capitalise on the privilege of agenda-setting, and facilitate problem-solving, rather than settle for declarations that are more aspirational in nature. Given its lack of material power, it should find new spaces where cooperative security can work best. Thus, while territorial disputes and major power rivalry are issues that require more than informal processes to resolve, there are other equally important challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic where ASEAN can have better room to manoeuvre (Caballero-Anthony 2020).

There are many examples where ASEAN has led in dealing with non-traditional security challenges. ASEAN’s AHA Centre has been at the forefront of coordinating humanitarian assistance and disaster relief within the region. Although ASEAN could not directly intervene in Myanmar’s refugee problem, its quiet diplomacy has seen it providing humanitarian aid to Rohingya refugees, including helping with arrangements for their safe return to Myanmar (ASEAN Secretariat 2019). At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, ASEAN convened the virtual ASEAN Plus Three meeting in April 2020 where together with its Plus Three partners—China, Japan and South Korea, they committed to set up an economic recovery fund and discussed plans for a regional stockpile of essential medical supplies that can be readily deployed for emergency needs (ASEAN, 2020). The idea of setting up a

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16 While this is still to take place and would probably take a longer time given the current political crisis in Myanmar, the involvement of the AHA is indicative that there has been room for ASEAN to work even in trying circumstances.
regional centre for disease control (CDC) was also advanced in partnership with Japan (Bangkok Post, 4 November 2020). Arguably, working on non-traditional security challenges like pandemics, food security and humanitarian assistance provides ASEAN the space and platform to lead.

In the face of economic headwinds, ASEAN must press ahead with economic initiatives like the AEC and the RCEP. As ASEAN is integral to global supply chains, the COVID-19 pandemic presents it with the opportunity to take advantage of the re-shoring and reconfiguration of these supply chains. Note for example the Japanese government’s recent announcement that it would provide subsidies to Japanese companies to bring back production centres from China to Japan, and to relocate to countries in Southeast Asia. These are openings that ASEAN should take advantage of.

A decade ago, the idea of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) was floated by Japan and was recently taken up again by the United States and Australia. Mindful that such initiative would only serve to fuel more tension in the region, ASEAN decided to offer its own iteration and advanced the ASEAN Outlook of the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) which was eventually adopted by the 18 members states of the EAS in 2016 (ASEAN Secretariat 2019). Unlike the FOIP which is regarded as exclusive and perceived to exclude China, ASEAN’s AOIP is inclusive and not discriminatory to states that are not “open”—(read as democratic). In sum, ASEAN’s brand of inclusive regionalism imbued with the practices of the ASEAN way still remains an important asset. And while ASEAN may be criticised for its slowness and failures, it does get things done.

Conclusion

For a regional organisation characterised by informality and weak institutions, ASEAN has certainly withstood the test of time. Far from being a perfect organisation, ASEAN presents an interesting case for why progress toward formalisation and legalisation do not necessarily follow informal institutions. ASEAN’s institutional development has shown that in spite of having a Charter and adopting a three-pillared community, which involves among others, inking more FTAs within and outside the ASEAN region, the path towards formalisation is not linear.

In fact, the ASEAN experience has shown that both informality and formality can co-exist. For all its reticence toward formalisation, ASEAN has a Charter that aims to build a rules-based ASEAN community, but at the same time ensures that the ASEAN-way remains as the overarching framework for regional order and interstate conduct. While lacking in formal structures from the rationalist-institutionalist lens, ASEAN mechanisms for political and security cooperation like the ARF, EAS and the ADMM+, as well as its economic arrangements like the AEC, APT and RCEP are imbued with several institutionalised patterns of cooperation. These patterns of cooperation include annual summits and ministerial meetings, regular meetings among officials from different sectors, technical and other capacity building programmes including standard settings, as well as joint military exercises and the like. These activities which continue to grow lead to deepening of political and economic
cooperation that are geared toward improving regional capacity to address common and shared challenges.

Thus, ASEAN’s own narrative of ‘non-legalistic’ institutionalisation shows that formality needs to be better understood to nuance path dependency of mainstream rationalist-institutionalist literature. Arguably, in spite of its lack of formal structures, ASEAN has not only survived as an institution, but its influence as a regional actor has also grown. Geo-politically, its centrality matters as ASEAN continues to be the (default) driver of regionalism in the Indo Pacific, regardless of being ‘light weight’. Despite changes of political leaders in major powers like the US, China, the EU and Japan, their attendance remains a constant fixture at ASEAN and ASEAN-led summits like the APT and EAS. This grouping of small and predominantly developing states has continued to punch above its weight by having its voice heard in regional institutions like APEC and global institutions like the UN and G-20.

Nonetheless, ASEAN’s institutionalisation cannot remain stagnant, nor should its centrality be taken for granted. Moreover, ASEAN community building cannot continue to be paralysed by difficult issues like the Myanmar crisis. It must stand by its Charter in getting its member(s) to adhere to the rule of law, the principles of democracy and constitutional government as spelt out in the APSC for the common good of the ASEAN citizens. It is in pressing ahead with its ASEAN community building processes and being transformative that ASEAN centrality becomes more meaningful for the people in ASEAN, and where ASEAN centrality becomes credible to the wider region and beyond.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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