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# Introduction: What Is ASEAN's Relevance for Geopolitical Stability in Asia?

Fenna Egberink and Frans-Paul van der Putten

The great powers in Asia are in the process of redefining their strategic positions towards each other. The most important factor underlying this adjustment is the rapid rise of the PR China as a major international actor. China is exceeding the status of a regional power and moving in the direction of being a global power. The other three main powers in Asia – the United States of America, Japan, and India – are searching for ways to respond to this development, as are China's smaller neighbouring countries. There is no multilateral security mechanism in place that is capable of managing and controlling the geopolitical changes occurring in Asia. Still, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN<sup>1</sup>) has often been credited with having a pacifying effect on the wider region due to its initiatives for greater regional cooperation through regional institution-building (Beeson 2009: 56). On 18 June 2010, the Clingendael Institute in The Hague hosted a seminar aimed at discussing ASEAN's potential to contribute to stable relations between the great powers in Asia.<sup>2</sup> Some of the papers that were presented on that occasion are published in this issue of the *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*.

The most fundamental geopolitical relationship in Asia is the one between the US, the region's strongest military actor, and China, the main potential rival to US leadership in the region. Changes in the US-China relationship are relevant to stability locally in any part of Asia, across the Asian region, and even at the global level. The China-US relationship is shaped not just by regional events but increasingly also by processes that take place outside Asia. Because ASEAN does not have a global reach, its

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- 1 The term 'ASEAN' is used in this introduction to refer to the collective actions of the organization's member states, regardless of whether these take place within a formal ASEAN framework. The term 'Asia' is used here to refer to South, Southeast, and East Asia. This introduction is based on the introductory presentation by the authors during the Clingendael Expert Meeting on 18 June 2010 (see below).
  - 2 'ASEAN's Potential as a Stabilizing Factor in Great Power Relations in Asia', Expert Meeting, Clingendael Institute, The Hague, 18 June 2010. More information is available at <<http://www.clingendael.nl/asia/events/20100618/>>.

impact on Sino-American relations is necessarily limited. There are various security issues in Asia that play a prominent role in Sino-American relations, such as the status of Taiwan and the South China Sea, the regional presence of US military assets, the growth of Chinese military capabilities, and the North Korean nuclear issue.

The two other main bilateral relationships among the major powers in Asia are those between China and Japan, and China and India. These relationships are relevant primarily to stability in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean region respectively. Although the United States and Japan have a long-standing security alliance, and there is a limited degree of strategic cooperation between India and the US, it is necessary to assess Beijing's relations with Tokyo and Delhi in their own right rather than regard them as a part of the Sino-American relationship. Both India and Japan are influential actors in their own regions, and their security interests are not identical to those of the US. Major security issues in China's relationship with Japan include the territorial dispute over the East China Sea and the growth of military capabilities on both sides. In the case of Sino-Indian relations, security issues likewise include territorial disputes (Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin in particular) and the expansion on both sides of military capabilities – in particular those relating to strategic positions in the Indian Ocean.

Since the early 1990s, the resolution of the Vietnam-Cambodia conflict and the relative muffling of tensions among the ASEAN member states have led to an increasingly regional, i.e. 'Asian', focus. ASEAN has sought to expand its stabilizing influence to the broader Asian region and distinguish itself from other Asian actors by positioning itself as a 'building block to wider regional architectures', initiating and leading the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), and East Asia Summit (EAS). Its core position in these organizations reflects ASEAN's non-threatening nature, being comprised of small and middle-large powers, and its appeal as 'security community', i.e. its merits as a Southeast Asian grouping (Chin 2007; Kraft 2000).

So far the main response of the Southeast Asian countries to China's rise has been to encourage the US, Japan, and India to remain involved in the region, and foster strong bilateral relations with China. However, should China's relations with one or more of the other powers deteriorate, then the neutrality and relative unity of Southeast Asia could be at risk. A conflict among the great powers would also affect the economic prosperity of the Southeast Asian countries. As a consequence, great power stability is closely related to both Southeast Asian security and ASEAN's overall position in the region (Tai 2008; Kraft 2000; Ba 2003).

It is relevant to note that most literature focuses on ASEAN's role in *East* Asian security. In terms of great power relations, this involves the triangular relationship between China, Japan, and the United States. The fourth Asian power, India, is usually left outside the analysis. While understandable – ASEAN's extra-regional security initiatives have always leaned firmly to the East – it is becoming increasingly difficult to separate South Asia and East Asia in terms of security relations. The Indian Ocean – where India is a major actor – plays a role in strategic rivalry between China and Japan, and China and the US. Also, India is often regarded as an emerging global power in its own right, and as a potential strategic partner of Japan and the United States.<sup>3</sup>

The following papers approach the issue of ASEAN's potential or capacity to contribute to stability from various perspectives. Lee Jones assesses the relationship between external and internal determinants of ASEAN's capacity. He argues that ASEAN is able to play a role in the wider region because – and as long as – the great powers are willing to let it do so, not because it has a major inherent capacity to do so. Internally, ASEAN faces diverging interests and strategic priorities which are arguably of a structural nature. Lest ASEAN finds a way to overcome these impediments, which at the moments seems highly unlikely, ASEAN's role in the region will be supported only by the default position created by current great power relations.

The contribution by Alice Ba addresses the question of what ASEAN's added value is for regional security in Asia. She notes that ASEAN has strengthened regional stability by contributing to 'a density of process' that is 'more conducive to diffuse reciprocity and thus cooperation'. At the same time, in spite of its historical merits and the ongoing importance of its regional initiatives, the author indicates that for ASEAN to retain its relevance it needs to overcome severe challenges, such as weak policy coordination and negative perceptions of its ability to act.

The final paper, by Fenna Egberink and Frans-Paul van der Putten, looks at ASEAN's role in the context of the three main bilateral relations among the great powers (China-US, China-Japan, and China-India). The authors argue that although ASEAN's influence is limited in terms of geographical reach and its impact on actual security issues, Southeast Asia is potentially an important object of great power rivalry and thus the sub-

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3 At the June 2010 Expert Meeting, the discussion focused on East Asia. Consequently the papers in this issue by Lee Jones and Alice Ba have the same regional focus. However, in order to explore the relevance of ASEAN for the India-China relationship, the paper by Fenna Egberink and Frans-Paul van der Putten focuses on both East and South Asia.

region is highly relevant to Asian geopolitics. The key question with regard to geopolitical stability is how ASEAN will deal with increased great power rivalries in its own sub-region.

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