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Regional Security in East Asia: ASEAN's Value Added and Limitations

Alice D. Ba

Abstract: This paper considers ASEAN's value added and limitations as regards its ability to play a meaningful and practical security role in East Asia and the Asia Pacific. It argues that ASEAN's contributions to regional security and within ASEAN-plus arrangements are not uniform. Instead, they vary depending on the relationship and the arrangement. This paper gives particular attention to two sets of relations: 1) ASEAN's relations with major powers; and 2) major power relations with one another. It argues that the latter has proven most challenging in terms of both practical changes to the regional security environment and growing questions about the appropriateness and capacity of ASEAN to "lead" institutional arrangements, but that such challenges may also vary depending on which major power relationship or regional institution is in question. It further argues that ASEAN's challenges are also conditioned by security contributions that are often understated, though dissatisfactions from both inside and outside the organization are likely to remain persistent challenges to ASEAN ability to defend its current role.

Keywords: ASEAN, East Asia, ASEAN Plus Three (APT), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit, major powers (China, Japan, United States), regionalism

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Introduction

Over the course of the 1990s, Asia experienced the unexpected emergence and growth of new regional multilateral arrangements, the most notable being the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Plus Three (APT). The East Asia Summit (EAS) now also joins that list. These “ASEAN-plus” arrangements marked a new chapter for the international relations of Asia in at least two respects. First, they provided regular opportunities for different actors to get together, stabilizing regional relations and countering expectations of major conflict in East Asia prevalent in the immediate post-Cold War period (Friedberg 1993). Second, arrangements have been notable for giving the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, a coalition of lesser powers, a geostrategic centrality that it might not otherwise have had. At the same time, ASEAN regional arrangements have also become sites and subjects for various disagreements, raising questions about ASEAN’s ability to remain in the institutional driver’s seat. This is especially true of the ARF, where the momentum of earlier years has been replaced by growing dissatisfactions on the parts of some non-ASEAN participants and consequently interest in alternative arrangements. At a minimum, such developments suggest some important dissatisfaction among different actors about existing regional arrangements and ASEAN itself. They also have implications for both ASEAN’s practical influence and its authority to shape both major power and institutional developments in Asia.

This paper addresses the following questions posed by the Clingendael Institute’s June 2010 workshop on ASEAN: What are ASEAN’s primary contributions to regional cooperation and regional security especially as regards ASEAN plus arrangements? What are ASEAN’s key constraints vis-à-vis “ASEAN plus” arrangements? How realistic is it to think that ASEAN can continue to play a leading role vis-à-vis great powers? And if so, what are the areas and mechanisms through which ASEAN would have the greatest effect?

1 What Are ASEAN’s Primary Contributions to Regional Cooperation and Regional Security?

When it comes to ASEAN being a “regional player” or leading force vis-à-vis other actors and institutional developments, ASEAN’s contributions to regional security have been critical but also very specific, constrained, and far from comprehensive. Specifically, ASEAN’s primary contributions lie in its ability to bring together different states, especially those that may harbor

important suspicions about one another and those whose institutional links have been thin. For example, this was the particular role that ASEAN played in the 1990s especially in relation to China whose relations with most actors in East Asia (e.g., the United States, Japan, South Korea, and the ASEAN states) were marked by suspicion and relatively thin relations in terms of institutional and regularized exchanges. ASEAN's initiative in creating new institutional arrangements and attracting different actors to a regional table have helped moderate some of those tensions of the early 1990s, most notably by creating new and regularized opportunities for communication, exchange, and confidence building.

ASEAN's ability to play this role stems from a number of attributes specific to the organization. Most notably, ASEAN's informality, its support for mutual coexistence (institutionalized via a noninterference norm), and dialogue-driven process made the prospect of participating in regional-multilateral arrangements more acceptable to different actors. Indeed, it is worth underscoring that China, the United States, as well as most of the ASEAN states were all initially resistant to the idea of new, expanded regional arrangements. This was especially true of proposed regional security arrangements like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Consequently, if such an arrangement were to be formed, prospective members would have to be convinced that the benefits would outweigh the risks and/or that the costs and risks of participation would be minimized. Given these dynamics, relative power questions – the fact of ASEAN's lesser power status – also helped support ASEAN's role.¹ In short, for major and minor powers alike, ASEAN's non-threatening institutional culture and non-threatening geopolitical weight helped minimize the risks and obstacles in the way of different states getting together.

At the same time, ASEAN's contributions to regional security and within ASEAN-plus arrangements are not uniform. Instead, they vary depending on the relationship and the arrangement. In general, one can make distinctions between three different sets of relationships, each of which feeds back into the question of ASEAN's institutional centrality in different ways. The first is relations between major powers, on the one hand, and the ASEAN states, on the other. The stabilization and regularization of cooperative exchanges between ASEAN states and each of the major powers can be seen as one of ASEAN's clearer contributions to regional security and regional cooperation. Indeed, ASEAN states' individual and collective relations with Northeast Asia's major powers, especially, are today more

1 See Ba (2006) for a discussion on how relative power may factor into the initial conditions of ASEAN's engagement of China. See also Johnston (2003) for a discussion of ASEAN's "counter real politik" strategy.

regularized, institutionalized, and predictable as a result of ASEAN's institutional efforts. The expansion of cooperation and dialogue between ASEAN states (individually and collectively) and China is a particular example of ASEAN's contribution on this front. Questions and uncertainties about the future trajectory of relations and China's long term relations clearly still remain; there are also questions about the relative contributions of China and ASEAN to the general improvement in relations seen. Nevertheless, at minimum, it is fair to say that ASEAN's initiative and commitment to engaging China solidified and reinforced China's willingness to participate in regional initiatives at a time of uncertain domestic and global politics and when regional multilateralism was more foreign and even a bit suspect to China's leadership (Ba 2006).

The second set of relationships regards relations between the major powers themselves. ASEAN's contributions on this front, however, are less clear. On the one hand, ASEAN has played the afore-discussed role in easing the ability of major powers to interface at a time when suspicions between major powers were more acute. That, in turn, made possible the institutionalization of such frameworks like the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Plus Three, which today provide regular opportunities for states to dialogue, improve transparency, and generally to offset the likelihood of major conflict. On the other hand, as further discussed below, competitive logics and jockeying for position among the major powers also clearly persist, suggesting what many see to be important limits to ASEAN's influence and ability to move major powers towards a greater sense of commonality or mutual interest.

Finally, the third set of relationships regards those within ASEAN itself. There are two related aspects of ASEAN's security contributions and role in ASEAN-plus arrangements when it comes to intra-ASEAN relations and security. First, ASEAN can be seen as being primarily responsible for its own corner of Asia. In general, ASEAN-plus arrangements have focused on questions that have more to do with major powers or issues that have to do with managing the growing interconnections and interrelations between Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. ASEAN itself is understood to be primarily responsible for managing issues amongst its own members. While challenges certainly remain, the Southeast Asian region has seen important growth in stability and cooperative exchanges associated with the development of ASEAN.

Second, ASEAN-plus arrangements have also introduced new pressures for ASEAN states to intensify intra-ASEAN cooperation in security and other areas as a way to consolidate and maintain its institutional centrality and influence in existing arrangements and in the face of different chal-

allenges and criticisms from other actors. Competitive pressures, for example, have led to new cooperation between different ASEAN ministries on a variety of issues, including, most notably, the creation of a regularly held ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting. The ASEAN Charter – which identifies three foundational pillars and cooperative areas within ASEAN (ASEAN economic community, an ASEAN political security community and an ASEAN socio-cultural community) as part of an effort to create and solidify an – “ASEAN community” – and its identification of new and expanded cooperation is also a particular example of expanded ASEAN cooperation in response to external (as well as internal) pressures, though the process of negotiating the Charter also revealed competing expectations and stoked underlying internal tensions within ASEAN.²

2 ASEAN Limitations

ASEAN’s security contributions notwithstanding, recent developments have nevertheless generated growing questions about the extent of ASEAN’s influence and whether ASEAN will be able to maintain its institutional centrality in the face of pressures from within and without. As suggested above, this is especially true of major power relations. Two areas that have been subject of particular concern have been, first, the persistence of competitive behaviors and logics amongst major powers, and second, the commitments of certain major powers to ASEAN-led processes, especially the ARF. On the first, it is clear that arrangements have not eradicated competitive dynamics between the United States and Japan, on the one hand, and China, on the other. Such competition has been evident, for example, in the form of competing regional and bilateral initiatives offered to ASEAN states by major powers (for example, competing free trade and economic partnerships), as well as shifted policy and bureaucratic priorities (as, for example, the case of Japan’s foreign aid priorities that downgrade China) (Yuzawa 2005). One sees such competition also in the political rhetoric often employed by officials (as, for example, the United States and China vis-à-vis one another), and more seriously, in recent political posturing by US and Chinese officials on the subject of the South China Sea. The premature emergence of the East Asia Summit is also another example – in this case, a particular expression of Japan’s growing concerns about China and what it perceived to be China’s influence over the APT process. Conse-

2 See, for example, comments of Singapore’s Tommy Koh and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in Jacob 2007.

quently, the EAS, which was originally to be the institutional extension of the APT process, has now become more a rival entity to the APT.

The persistence of such competitive logics despite 15-plus years of participating in common ASEAN arrangements suggests important limitations to ASEAN's influence and role. Some conclude, for example, that ASEAN's primary value added and strength vis-à-vis other actors is at the initial stages, when relations are less certain, less dense, and vis-à-vis states that harbor suspicions about one another. In contrast, ASEAN is more challenged in its ability to get participants to work out their differences and to overcome mutual suspicions. ASEAN's primary value is thus not as a conflict resolver but as a relationship facilitator and convener. Amitav Acharya and Evelyn Goh, for example, characterize the ARF as "not useful in and of itself but rather as a facilitating meeting place" (Goh and Acharya 2002). By this argument, ASEAN's influence extends little beyond its ability to issue the invitations and to provide the "platform" for others to gather.

A related limitation of ASEAN and its extended regional arrangements is one of policy coordination. The caricatures of ASEAN as a "talk shop" and the ARF as "all bark, no bite" speak to this criticism and limitation. Formal dispute resolution is also something that tends to elude ASEAN-related cooperation. These are historical challenges associated with ASEAN and its institutional culture, whose members have been both more protective of their national autonomy and prerogatives and more tolerant of others' desire to do the same. A sense of the fragility of regional relations has also tended to act as a check on those who might seek more ambitious initiatives (Ba 2009). This dynamic finds institutional expression in the two institutional features that have come to be most associated with ASEAN, namely, its regard for noninterference and its consensus-driven decision-making process. In expanded arrangements, the consensus process also serves the more instrumental purpose of constraining the ability of major powers (individually or in concert) to impose their will on the rest.

ASEAN's institutional constraints in producing more timely practical cooperation, however, have become a source of dissatisfaction on the parts of some participants and subject to growing commentary and criticism from both analysts and policy officials – so much so that the issue has begun to destabilize the acceptability of ASEAN's central position. In other words, the debate is such that ASEAN's institutional challenge is no longer just practical (that is, the practical ability to produce timely coordination) but also normative (that is, the appropriateness of ASEAN playing the central institutional role it has in larger arrangements). The challenges of producing timely, "action oriented" responses to pressing problems have become a particular source of dissatisfaction among Western powers like the United

States and Australia. Coming from different institutional cultures, both countries have at times downgraded the level of attention directed at ASEAN arrangements in favor of alternative arrangements. In the case of the United States, the administration of George W. Bush, for example, redoubled its attention to cultivating and expanding existing and new bilateral partnerships. It also gave more attention to both APEC and the Shangri-La Dialogue as potential alternatives to the ARF. There was also discussion about how the Six Party Talks on North Korea might provide a model for a more concert of powers kind of system (notably, cutting ASEAN out entirely). Similarly, Australia under former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd expressed “strong dissatisfaction with the evolution of regional multilateral architecture”, resulting in an aggressive (though ultimately, unsuccessful) push for an alternative “Asia Pacific Community (APC)” arrangement as a way to streamline and reconceptualize ASEAN processes (Searight 2010).

While dissatisfaction is most intense among Western, non-Asian participants, dissatisfaction has also not been limited to them. Most notably, Japan has also begun to explore other institutional options – this, despite its being one of the earliest supporters of expanded regional arrangements.³ In addition to the EAS, former Prime Ministers Koizumi and Hatoyama offered different “East Asia Community” options (though these, like Rudd’s APC proposal, would be unsuccessful). Though generally more supportive of the value of dialogue and a greater understanding of both ASEAN’s and the East Asian region’s political constraints given competing major power pressures, Japan has nevertheless grown increasingly frustrated with the ARF: what it sees as the ARF’s failure to act as a more effective restraint on China, its general limitations in coordinating cooperation in areas of traditional security, and especially what it sees to be the ARF’s failure to make significant progress in the development of confidence building measures and preventive diplomacy processes (Yuzawa 2005).

At the same time, the preoccupation with ASEAN’s coordination challenges vis-à-vis “practical cooperation” can also make it seem that there is greater consensus on this question than in fact exists. More to the point, if full consensus existed, then the question of policy coordination would likely be less of an issue. But the challenge for ASEAN is that major powers have not just different policy priorities and preferences but also different expectations about institutional processes. Put another way, ASEAN faces a frag-

3 Japan, for example, was instrumental in laying the groundwork for APEC. It was also the first of the major powers to push for a new ARF-like regional security arrangement. On APEC, see Ravenhill 2001. See also Krauss 2000. On ARF, see Yuzawa 2005.

mented major power audience that complicates any collective effort. Most notably, the United States and China have different approaches and expectations on these questions, even if they might both seek greater coordination on certain issues. The United States equates “practical cooperation” with cooperation that is more rule-bound and that is characterized by clearer timelines, obligations, and consequences for noncompliance. However, China’s preference is for a more flexible process. Thus, ASEAN’s challenge is how to respond to US concerns and criticisms – which is part of the underlying context informing the current preoccupation with “practical cooperation” – without alienating China and reversing what has thus far been a positive trajectory in China’s regional foreign policy from the perspective of most ASEAN states.

Within ASEAN itself, there have also been divisions over this question of how to improve its record on practical cooperation. For example, in an era of heightened global and transnational challenges, many ASEAN states themselves have also been seeking ways to improve collective responses to pressing problems. Cognizant of the growing impatience of Western powers, especially, with ASEAN processes, many ASEAN elites have also argued for improving practical cooperation as a way to maintain ASEAN’s institutional centrality. The ASEAN Charter was a response to both sets of concerns. In other words, by improving ASEAN’s ability to coordinate positions and policies amongst its own members, they could both better respond to pressing common problems and better defend their preferences and centrality vis-à-vis larger actors in expanded arrangements. The Charter can also provide possible building blocks for expanded regional efforts beyond ASEAN (Hew and Anthony 2000).

On the other hand, the process of negotiating the ASEAN Charter and its components also proved protracted and even contentious at times, exposing and intensifying existing differences and faultlines within ASEAN. In fact, it actually set back efforts to streamline and make more efficient ASEAN’s decision-making process. Specifically, efforts to solidify and further institutionalize an “ASEAN minus X” principle that allowed initiatives to go forward short of full consensus provoked a backlash, especially among newer members that saw themselves potentially marginalized by the move. Consequently, consensus is now required before the “ASEAN minus X” principle can be applied. The possibility of modifying the consensus process in wider regional arrangements like the APT and ARF is considered even more contentious. Again, in such arrangements, the consensus process for ASEAN states also serves an important instrumental purpose: it guards against major powers dominating the process or setting the agenda. Indeed, while ASEAN has made some concessions in terms of committee chairman-

ships in the ARF, it remains jealously protective of its centrality. On the other hand, as noted above, ASEAN's dilemma today is that the issue is now big enough that ASEAN cannot afford to do nothing (hence, the Charter's efforts).

Also as noted above, the challenge for ASEAN has become not just a practical one but a normative one. The fact that the Charter fell short of expectation was a practical disappointment, but the divisiveness of the Charter process also had reputational effects for ASEAN vis-à-vis non-ASEAN actors. Specifically, it seemed to illustrate a degree of incoherence in ASEAN and to confirm ASEAN's coordination challenges, thus underscoring questions some actors already had about the value of certain processes. Even more seriously, the process of negotiating the Charter may have also weakened the commitment of some ASEAN member states themselves to ASEAN. Concern has especially focused on a newly democratizing Indonesia, which has expressed concern that ASEAN, whose institutional development remains constrained by more "illiberal" members, may no longer be consistent with its democratizing identity. As many, including those from within ASEAN, have argued, ASEAN's effectiveness and influences is greatest when its member-states stand together and are united (Severino 2006). However, when fragmented, ASEAN loses not just the practical leverage that comes from strength in numbers, but also normative authority which has been one key ASEAN advantage vis-à-vis other actors. ASEAN has to demonstrate to others that it is an effective body, able to lead others in the building of consensus and at minimum not stymied by its own divisions. If not, marginalization will be more likely because others will seek out other arrangements that meet their needs.

3 Concluding Assessment and Future Trajectories

Given the challenges described above, it is easy to be pessimistic about ASEAN's prospects, and to allow its challenges to overshadow its security contributions. By way of conclusion, it may thus be useful to consider ASEAN's security contributions with a longer term view, as well as what the mixed picture above means for both regional security in Asia and for ASEAN.

As highlighted above, ASEAN faces some significant challenges when it comes to its ability to coordinate timely cooperation and to transform major power relations. At the same time, on each of these points, there may also be more going on than meets the eye. Taking up first the question of coordination, some have observed that ASEAN arrangements vary in terms

of the degree of coordination and practical cooperation associated with them – this despite their being similarly informal and consensus-driven in their institutional design. The ARF has proven, for example, much more challenged than the APT, whose record on functional cooperation has been more robust. Of note, “The APT finance ministers’ process continues to outpace all other regional projects in substantive cooperation and institution building” (Searight 2010). There are also now 48 mechanisms to manage and facilitate cooperation in at least 16 areas, in addition to annual (separate) meetings of APT Finance, Economic, and Foreign Ministers. Monetary cooperation has seen the greatest activity as evidenced by the March 2010 decision to upgrade the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI), now the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization (CMIM) (Searight 2010). The thirteen states of the APT process also work together regularly on a growing number of other issues, including health, labor, tourism, the environment, in addition to developing technical skills and functional capacities (Hamilton-Hart 2003). Such developments lead Chu Shulong, among others to conclude that the APT “has made more specific, concrete and practical progress in regional cooperation than any of the other multilateral approaches” (Chu 2007). While the APT has not addressed traditional security issues like the ARF, the cooperation that takes place within the APT framework nevertheless has security implications via institutional ties and trust building. The degree of cooperative activity associated with the APT process is especially notable given the previously discussed concerns that Japan has had about China vis-à-vis the APT process. Not only is the APT process providing states cooperative opportunities that they might not otherwise have had given mutual insecurities, but the growth in cooperation over time is also an indication of the growing ability of states to work together in the face of common challenges.

Lastly, to return to the debates about ASEAN and its ability to produce more practical cooperation, the contrasting records of the APT and ARF arrangements would suggest that the challenges of coordination in the ARF may not be a function of ASEAN institutionalism per se, so much as the politics and membership of that particular entity. Again, as noted above, those most impatient with ASEAN processes have tended to be Western powers, especially the United States. In contrast, there is greater agreement about the value of ASEAN processes within the APT. In that forum, Japan’s concerns focus on China, less the process itself. What this means is that in the APT, ASEAN processes are better able to offer an institutionalized way to facilitate compromises and cooperation, whereas in the ARF that same process is much more politicized and thus more limited in its ability to produce meaningful agreement and cooperation that is mutually

satisfactory to all. On this last point, it is also worth noting that the ARF is associated with more cooperation on the critical question of preventative diplomacy than sometimes acknowledged even by its members – a fact that speaks to the politicization of the process (as opposed to the inherent limitations of the process itself).⁴ To be clear, this is not to say that ASEAN's processes are not challenged on this question of policy coordination. Rather, the point here is also to give consideration to the ways that other factors also condition how the process works and how it may affect ASEAN's ability to shape security developments and relations. This contrast also speaks to the earlier point that ASEAN's influence and role varies, depending on the relationship and arrangement in question.

In addition, experiences and exchanges in larger arrangements like the ARF and APT have also helped inspire and facilitate new cooperation and new frameworks between smaller groups of actors. For example, we see dramatically expanded functional and cooperative exchanges between ASEAN states (individually and collectively) with China and Japan. Even the United States, which has been among the most impatient with ASEAN, has expanded its institutionalized ties with ASEAN through expanded functional cooperation like the Enterprise of ASEAN Initiative and ASEAN-US Enhanced Partnership, the creation of a new ASEAN ambassadorship, the decision (under the Obama administration) to sign ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, as well as the establishment of a new regular US-ASEAN Summit. Nor is such expanded exchange limited to ASEAN's relations with the different major powers, as major powers themselves are also finding new opportunities to cooperate with one another. For example, building on their experiences and exchanges in ASEAN arrangements, Northeast Asian states have seen a notable expansion in functional exchanges. Especially significant have been developments in trilateral cooperation between China, Japan, and South Korea, a process that began in 1999 and then was further solidified in November 2003 with the three states' Joint Declaration on the Promotion of Tripartite Cooperation, which called for trilateral cooperation in fourteen issues areas, including trade and investment, IT, and the environment (Yoshimatsu 2005). To be clear, this is not to say that significant challenges do not remain, but such developments nevertheless offer a counterpoint to the argument that major power tensions, especially in Northeast Asia, are intractable and have not seen much change

4 See discussion in Emmers and Tan 2009. For Emmers and Tan, the problem is less about preventive diplomacy or ASEAN informalism *per se*, but rather what they describe as the ironic formalization and consequently rigidification of ASEAN informal diplomacy within the ARF itself. The ARF's informal, consensual process is not a failure of principle, but instead a "failure in practice".

since the introduction of ASEAN arrangements.⁵ Such improvements do, of course, create a dilemma for ASEAN in that new Northeast Asian processes (desirable as they may be in the interest of regional security) do introduce institutional alternatives that potentially overshadow and/or bypass ASEAN.

On the related concern about the persistence of major power tensions, part of ASEAN's challenge is that so much of major power relations takes place outside ASEAN's institutional settings. This situation raises the likelihood of mixed signals; that is, any improvements that emerge within ASEAN frameworks could be offset by the many exchanges taking place between major powers elsewhere bilaterally and in non-ASEAN settings. This is especially true of China and the United States. Put another way, much that takes place between the United States and China lies beyond ASEAN's reach, even if the persistence of tensions between the United States and China is not necessarily reflective of ASEAN's inherent limitations.

Lastly, while much attention has focused on ASEAN's failure to resolve major power tensions and competition, less has been said about other ways that ASEAN has helped manage tensions and channel that competition. For example, ASEAN processes have helped moderate tensions and maintain major power relations in the face of bilateral crisis/tensions at official levels. Both technical and functional work at lower levels and regularly scheduled meetings at higher ones help ensure against complete breaks, as in 2006 when China and Japan had no high-level contact bilaterally but did meet at regional meetings. The introduction of ASEAN arrangements has also helped restructure the ways in which some major power competition now plays out. For example, ASEAN and its arrangements are offering alternative outlets for major powers to satisfy their own status and recognition needs, as well as to pursue their ambitions vis-à-vis one another. The proliferation of free trade agreements and economic frameworks, the competitive signing of TAC, and the creation of new ASEAN ambassadorships are all examples of competition – but it is competition within regionally appropriate bounds. Similarly, the rivalry for political leadership between China and Japan has played out interestingly through a competition to provide regional public goods that in fact has helped encourage regional integration and cooperation (Yoshimatsu 2005).

The existence of regional arrangements also creates normative pressures on major powers to act multilaterally (and at least have to justify their

5 Another reason to question the so-called intractability of Northeast Asian tensions is the rapidity with which China, South Korea, and Japan have emphasized engagement, especially with the departure of Japan's former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi.

actions when they do not). Indeed, there does appear to be awareness among the major powers (China and Japan, more than the United States, however) that they each, in different ways and varying degrees, have reputational problems that can detract from their ability to achieve goals, and that ASEAN and regional multilateralism offer them ways to make their own roles and interests in the region less controversial and provocative – in a word, legitimate. This is most apparent in the incorporation of regional multilateralism in China’s “new security” practices in which regional multilateralism has become a key piece. But one even sees this in US policy in which Washington under the Obama administration has reengaged ASEAN and reaffirmed its commitment to regional arrangements following a period of particularly contentious unilateralism, especially under the first administration of George W. Bush – a unilateralism that damaged the US reputation in Asia and, in turn, its practical influence.⁶

In sum, ASEAN’s challenges should not obscure what are also some significant security contributions. ASEAN has provided an institutional environment and institutional opportunities that have helped moderate and channel major power competition and tensions, and at the same time, set the stage and context for cooperation in certain areas. ASEAN’s influence and contributions are far from comprehensive and as noted, decision-making and collective action can be protracted affairs with what can be limited outcomes. In this sense, analysts may be right that ASEAN’s contributions and influence are most apparent during earlier stages of a relationship when relations are thinner, when actors are more mutually suspicious, and relations more prone to rupture. Nevertheless, in such circumstances, the ability to draw actors into more regularized and institutionalized settings thus becomes critical. While those initial institutional interactions may or may not result in improved relations and greater cooperation, that initial willingness to get together and talk would nevertheless be a necessary first step before anything more substantive could develop. ASEAN has played a critical role in that process. Similarly, while ASEAN process may not compel a formal resolution to problems, ASEAN processes can help transform issues into “non-issues” or at least “lesser” issues. Academic and policy discourses sometimes can overly downplay these kinds of contributions – which ultimately are associated with ASEAN’s role in shaping the social environment of cooperation, but are arguably just as important as any specific “functional

6 See, for example, arguments made by Han Sung-Joo, Tommy Koh, and C. Raja Mohan, in a report prepared for the Asia Foundation (Han, Koh, and Mohan 2008). They collectively concluded that while the US may still hold the balance of power in East Asia, “it stands to lose influence in the region” as a result of its “narrow perspective” on East Asian regionalism efforts.

cooperation” and, as suggested, may even be considered a precondition of such cooperation. Nevertheless, in that ASEAN’s value added on this point tends to be more contextual and consequently indirect, it does make it more difficult for regional actors and observers to see ASEAN’s value added at times, which, in turn, complicates ASEAN’s ability to defend its role.

The discussion above has also highlighted how dissatisfaction has generated interest in alternative arrangements and the potential challenge they pose to ASEAN – though it is notable that none of the challenges have been very successful thus far. The most recent challenges from Australia and Japan have basically been sidelined along with the prime ministers associated with them – but even before Rudd’s and Hatoyama’s departures, neither proposal was well received or supported either by most ASEAN states or China and the United States. The Shangri-La Dialogue hosted by London’s International Institute for Strategic Studies is probably the most serious challenger to the ARF, though it took five years before China was convinced to participate officially (China only began officially participating in 2007). What this suggests is that ASEAN still has a critical and unique role to play – at least if actors desire inclusive participation. Indeed, the evolution of regionalisms in Asia (going back to the 1950s even) has shown how other powers have proven more challenged in their ability to draw in different actors. Major powers may be able to coordinate smaller groups of countries in an “ad hoc multilateral” kind of way but they have tended to be challenged in their ability to bring about, let alone lead, more inclusive groupings. In fact, in the case of the United States and China in the 1990s, they would not have even had the desire to do so. Moreover, the exclusiveness of major power-led arrangements would also likely have had competitive effects. As evidenced by the discussion above, multilateralism today is by no means perfectly practiced among the major powers, but there are now normative and structural pressures that compel major powers to be both more multilateral and more ASEAN-regarding than they otherwise would be. Viewed in this way, ASEAN’s role and contributions becomes more clear because without ASEAN and its efforts these last 15 years, the Asian region would in all likelihood have looked less inclusive, more competitive, and certainly, less multilateral.

To compare today to the situation of 15-20 years ago thus reveals a region that is more multilateral in its frameworks, thicker in terms of the density of exchanges between actors, as well as more robust in the kinds of functional cooperation that takes place between actors. Major powers regularly participate in regional frameworks and consult with one another and with ASEAN in ways they did not before. At minimum, ASEAN arrangements have contributed to a density of process is more conducive to diffuse

reciprocity and thus cooperation. Challenges of coordination still remain great, but even those more critical of ASEAN processes make note of the improved “quality of the security dialogue process” and members’ heightened comfort level with “discussing sensitive issues” even in the ARF, the most challenged of ASEAN’s institutional processes (Yuzawa 2005: 475).

Nevertheless, all this is not to say that ASEAN does not face some significant challenges. And most immediately, it must address the practical challenges of policy coordination, as well as the reputational challenges associated with perceptions of ASEAN as a mere “talk shop”. Even if ASEAN’s contributions are sometimes obscured and the degree of practical cooperation sometimes underestimated, perceptions matter. If ASEAN wishes to remain relevant vis-à-vis a larger regional security environment and, indeed, even within its own narrower Southeast Asian context, it must address these growing dissatisfactions from inside and outside the organization. Otherwise, interest in other venues and arrangements and threats to ASEAN’s institutional centrality will always be around the corner.

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