

Preventing War, Building a Rules-based Order: Challenges Facing the ASEAN Political–Security Community¹

Aileen Baviera

Professor, Asian Center, University of the Philippines
Editor-in-chief, Asian Politics and Policy

‘In substance, security is at the core of ASEAN’s existence; indeed, in today’s comprehensive concept of security, as well as in the original conception of ASEAN, regional economic cooperation and integration are seen as part of the endeavour to bolster regional security through economic development, even as security continues to be regarded as an essential condition for development.’

Rodolfo Severino, former ASEAN Secretary–General, 2004

Glass Half-Empty or Glass Half-Full

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) turns 50 in 2017. Both critics and supporters of ASEAN have much to say about the group’s achievements and shortcomings since its establishment in 1967. Perhaps more fairly, others will measure ASEAN’s record only from the time it achieved its current composition of 10 members, in 1999.

Critics will say ASEAN has been measured and found wanting. There are too many conflicts within and amongst its members that remain unresolved. There is too much privileging of the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs, at the expense of effective cooperation. Organisationally, ASEAN is too process-oriented while inadequate in achieving timely results and impact; and consensus remains shallow even on certain critical issues that require solid agreement. The absence of a common foreign policy and differences in security priorities and threat perceptions continue to stand in the way of true integration, it might be said.

¹ The author is grateful for comments on an earlier draft provided by Kavi Chongkittavorn and other editors of the project.

Supporters, on the other hand, will argue: were it not for ASEAN, would Southeast Asia even be as peaceful, stable, and economically progressive as it has been? Are not the norms and practices associated with the ‘ASEAN Way’ – including informality, nonconfrontation, relying on consultation and consensus-based decision-making – precisely the reasons member states have remained together all these years? The ASEAN Charter and the three community blueprints, moreover, contain measures that are intended to enhance ASEAN’s effectiveness; thus, ASEAN is already on its way away from informality to institutionalisation as a rules-based organisation. The fact that other countries, including big powers and non-likeminded states, choose to engage in ASEAN-led multilateral arrangements is also clear recognition of the organisation’s important contributions.

This mixed record of ASEAN has led to sharply contrasting observations, captured in the oft-cited metaphor of ASEAN being simultaneously perceived as a glass half-full (in the eyes of supporters and optimists) and a glass half-empty (in the view of critics and sceptics). To help make sense of the significance of ASEAN now, and to draw insights into what needs to be done to fill a half-empty glass closer to the brim, several eminent analysts of ASEAN and Southeast Asia come together in this volume to share their analyses, assessments, and their recommendations for ASEAN’s way forward, focusing on the project of building an ASEAN Political–Security Community (APSC).

Finding Southeast Asia and Shaping It into ASEAN

Wang Gungwu, in his essay ‘Southeast Asia and Continental and Maritime Powers in a Globalised World’ tells us the story of Southeast Asia in *longue duree*. It is a story of how the continental states and the maritime states of the region developed in different directions in response to their respective environments. Disparate worldviews emerged, affecting cultures and politics in each country, based on the maritime–continental divide, which the eminent Professor Wang describes as the contrast between ‘a free, open maritime mindset’ and ‘a more fixed, land-based, continental mindset’.

Migration, conquest, and interaction amongst various linguistic and tribal groups led to mutual influences amongst the peoples of precolonial Southeast Asia. Beginning in the 16th century, the region became enveloped in early globalisation through trade and cultural contacts with the West, and shared experiences of colonialism (save for Thailand). Centuries later, in the aftermath of independence movements, postcolonial transitions, and the experience of World War II, the newly sovereign nation states had to face simultaneous burdens of nation-building and region-building. The Cold War, marked by bipolar confrontation between the superpowers, was the setting against

which ASEAN first came into being, and it helped shape the founding member states' aspirations for a neutral and autonomous regional community.

Wang Gungwu also notes that Southeast Asia is situated in the economic and cultural spheres of influence of the two great civilizations of China and India, both traditionally continental powers, but who now depend heavily on maritime trade and thus aspire to become naval powers. Both countries are bound to figure in ASEAN's future.

Whether Southeast Asia shall once more become an arena for big power competition or manage to defend its autonomy against the machinations of more powerful states depends largely on ASEAN's success in building a political–security community. Thus far, ASEAN has demonstrated considerable ability to adjust and redefine its role while adapting to a changing regional environment, as Table 1 shows.

Table 1: ASEAN's Role in the Changing Security Environment of Southeast Asia, 1967–2017

	1967–	1997–	2017–
Regional Security Environment	Cold War; SEA divided into communist and anticommunist states; Indochina wars and internal conflicts	Post-Cold War peace dividends; China's opening up and economic reforms; ASEAN membership expansion amid Asian financial crisis	Relative stability; economic interdependence; but growing geopolitical rivalry amongst powers
Threat Perceptions in SEA	Domino theory; fear of export of communist revolution	Financial turmoil poses challenges to national resilience and leads to political instability	Non-traditional security (climate change, pandemics, transnational crime); terrorism; South China Sea disputes
Role of Great Powers	US intervention in Viet Nam; SEATO; Cultural Revolution in China	US less engaged in post 9–11 Asia–Pacific; China begins charm offensive, launches New Security Concept	'rebalancing' US; 'assertive' China; 'normalising' Japan; 'rising' India; 'resurgent' Russia
Consciousness of Regional Identity	Mutual distrust from Konfrontasi, Malaysia–Philippines conflict over Sabah, Singapore–Malaysia tensions	Experiments in inclusive ASEAN-led multilateral arrangements (ARF, APT, etc.)	2008 Charter; ASEAN Community (via ASEAN Economic Community) declared in December 2015
Types of Security Cooperation	Confidence-building and conflict avoidance; informal and irregular security exchanges	Inclusive security mechanisms focused on cooperative, comprehensive security (ARF); Track Two diplomacy	More institutionalised approaches through ADMM, ADMM Plus, EAS; greater emphasis on nontraditional security

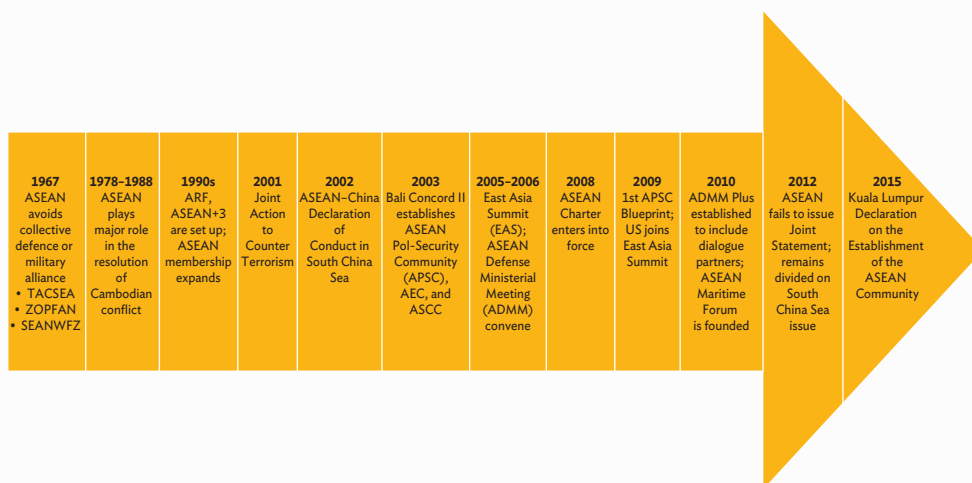
ADMM = ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting, APT = ASEAN Plus Three, ARF = ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations, EAS = East Asia Summit, SEA = Southeast Asia, SEATO = Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, US = United States.

Source: Author's compilation.

ASEAN survived the ideological fissures of the Cold War and historical animosities that existed amongst member states at the time of its founding in 1967. It gradually built, on the basis of both shared interests and common principles and norms, various practices and mechanisms that helped prevent conflict amongst its members and allowed it to play an autonomous role in shaping the regional security architecture. The Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality or ZOPFAN (1971), the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia or TAC (1976), and the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone Treaty or SEANWFZ (1995) were building blocks of the ASEAN worldview that have subsequently shaped its ties with the rest of the world.

Following the end of the Cold War, economic growth, political stability, and relative peace in Southeast Asia encouraged the expansion of ASEAN membership to include former ideological adversaries. From its third decade of existence, ASEAN did more than survive and prevent the outbreak of war – it made itself far more relevant not just to its own members but also to the major powers and other countries who were in common search of a peaceful new regional order. Notwithstanding the founding fathers’ reticence during the early years about playing up ASEAN’s involvement in security cooperation and international politics, it is precisely in this field that ASEAN has left an indelible mark and where it may have found its deepest justification or *raison d’être*.

Figure 1: Milestones in ASEAN Security Cooperation and Institution-Building



AEC = ASEAN Economic Community, ARF = ASEAN Regional Forum, ASCC = ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations, SEANWFZ = Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone Treaty, TACSEA = ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, US = United States, ZOPFAN = Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality.

Source: Author’s compilation.

Shared Interests, But Is there Shared Identity?

Amongst the criticisms of ASEAN is that its cooperation agenda continues to be driven by the ‘logic of consequentiality’ rather than the ‘logic of appropriateness’ (as Tan See Seng elaborates in his essay in this volume), whereby cooperation is seen as instrumental for the promotion of self-interest rather than for the pursuit of the collective public good or rule-based normative order. Some analysts would argue that such focus on national interest is a necessary early phase in community building that will gradually evolve into a more normative framing of the regionalist project, as the sense of regional identity grows and cooperation leads to greater interest convergence.

For constructivist scholars like Amitav Acharya, shared identity is key to building a community. He posits that ASEAN’s founding fathers imagined such a collective entity where the member states drew upon a shared historical heritage and identified contemporary common goals. Acharya enumerates five major sources of ASEAN identity or what he calls a ‘we-feeling’: nationalism (anchored on anti-colonial struggles of member states); religion (not one but many); cultural norms and modes of interaction (the ‘ASEAN Way’); a modernist developmental state orientation and approach; and regionalism.

Factors that can contribute to the decline of regional identity, on the other hand, include globalisation, membership expansion, alternative conceptions of regionalism driven by market integration, and the intramural differences within ASEAN over the basic norms of sovereignty and non-interference in dealing with transnational issues. Domestic politics in member states may also undermine regional identity, as might divide-and-rule policies of certain big powers over weaker ones in ASEAN. ASEAN has been prevented from reaching consensus on the South China Sea by a mix of pressures and economic inducements by extra-regional powers on its members. Overcoming the member states’ preoccupation with their own national concerns to give way to advocacy of collective interests and aspirations has remained difficult, but progress is being made in many respects.

Because of the dual contribution of ASEAN to shaping cooperative relations amongst its own member states and to forging constructive security interactions beyond the region, Acharya posits that ASEAN regional identity needs to stand on two foundations. The first is a strong internal support base open to participation by civil society and non-state actors so that the regional identity will belong to the people and not only to the state elites. The second is a continuing posture of neutrality with respect to big power rivalries, which has made ASEAN a more effective partner for all powers than it otherwise would have been.

Challenges of Institutional Reform

Since the 2008 entry into force of the ASEAN Charter, member states have moved with much more resolve to transform ASEAN into a rules-based body with specified functional roles amongst its organs, and with duties, responsibilities, and consequences set out in a much clearer way. Before the Charter, ASEAN relied mainly on the declarations and statements agreed upon by the leaders to define the tasks ahead. Strong personal ties amongst the early leaders and the commitment to the TAC were essentially what wedded member states to the project of ASEAN regionalism.

When the three pillars of the ASEAN Community were first officially touted in the 2003 Bali Concord II, ASEAN was envisioned to build a ‘security community’ rather than a ‘political–security community’. ‘Security community’ is a concept known to international relations scholars as a region where the likelihood of members resorting to war to address disagreements amongst them was close to nil. But it is clear that long before the APSC was conceived, TAC had been pursuing the creation of a no-war zone in the Southeast Asian region as its objective.

Susumu Yamakage thus considers TAC the foundational basis of ASEAN. As ASEAN’s earliest instrument, TAC proved resilient over time. For instance, its principles underpinned efforts by regional states to find win–win solutions to some of their most intractable issues.² It helped connect ASEAN with other countries, as accession became a requirement for states who wanted to be dialogue partners of ASEAN. It subsequently became the centrepiece of multilateral arrangements such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Plus Three, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus. But to become a ‘rules-based community of shared values and norms; a cohesive, peaceful, stable and resilient region with shared responsibility for comprehensive security; and a dynamic and outward-looking region in an increasingly integrated and interdependent world’ as envisioned for APSC, TAC was not going to be enough.

ASEAN centrality became a key principle in its extra-regional interactions, as other states began to recognise the value of ASEAN’s multilateralist norms and its inclusivist, win–win approach to conflict management. In the security arena, ASEAN became known as a norm entrepreneur, a driver of the consultative, confidence-building processes, even though the organisation itself remained collectively weak in capability

² In the case of Thai–Cambodian dispute over Preah Vihear, both parties opted for a legal solution via arbitration, but ultimately chose informal ways of implementing the ruling in accordance with TAC.

and technically leaderless. Indeed, one of the most serious challenges ASEAN has had to face is the huge gap between its institutional capacity to help govern the region and the promises outlined in the APSC, now that it is in the driver's seat.

Simon Tay believes that ASEAN's leadership role and the centrality it aspires to within the regional architecture will be under pressure if any of several scenarios emerge: first, should competition amongst other powers for influence in Southeast Asia increase; second, should the commitment of some member states to economic integration remain weak; and third, should challenges of global governance, relating to the management of global commons, heighten expectations that ASEAN simply cannot fulfil due to its inability to muster adequate energy, talent, and resources.

Tay posits that ASEAN needs to be able to speak with greater coherence to have a more persuasive voice on the global stage. He also prescribes that ASEAN actively promotes interdependence and connectivity; makes more progress on domestic governance reforms within member states; and prioritises collective over particularistic interests when needed. The future ASEAN must be an agenda-setter rather than a convener, action-oriented rather than dialogue-based, and non-aligned but actively engaged.

For this pro-active ASEAN that Tay imagines, which is a hub for multilateral cooperation initiatives involving extra-regional dialogue partners whose political cultures differ from those of Southeast Asia, the old behavioural practices characterised by informality and flexibility may no longer be appropriate. Indeed, recent years have seen ASEAN states turning more and more towards reliance on binding rules and procedures rather than to personalistic modes of conflict management, perhaps indicative of ASEAN's growing institutional maturity.

Tan See Seng, however, expresses some doubt as to whether the latter is in fact what we are seeing in ASEAN, and whether this ultimately will lead to a more effective and sustainable regional cooperation amongst the member states, especially insofar as the management of intra-ASEAN differences is concerned. For instance, some of ASEAN's long-standing dispute settlement mechanisms such as the High Council have never been resorted to. Member states prefer to take their own intra-ASEAN territorial and sovereignty disputes to international bodies such as the International Court of Justice rather than rely on regional solutions. While the ASEAN Charter contains new provisions on dispute settlement, it also upholds the preponderant role of leaders (i.e. summitry) rather than of rules and organs in decision-making.

The Charter, moreover, codifies inter-governmentalism as well as existing norms and principles such as ‘non-interference in internal affairs’ and the need for consensus, both of which have been criticised by many as retrogressive and falling below expectations of a transforming ASEAN.

Consensus-building remains a difficult process, which, in this volume, Kevin Villanueva and Ambassador Rosario Manalo try to unpack by exploring its sources and meanings for ASEAN. They examine how exactly consensus is arrived at (through transactions involving definition, contestation, and conciliation), and look at the arguments for either keeping it as a core principle or consigning it into the ‘dustbin of memory’. Using careful analysis of ASEAN negotiations on human rights as a case study, the co-authors argue that consensus operates at two levels – ‘the first being the selection of what counts amongst the variety of interests, preferences, and outcomes as “controversial”; and the second being the negotiation of what counts amongst these as “admissible”, or as is the term of use and currency within ASEAN, “comfortable”.’

From Traditional to Nontraditional Security Cooperation

The founding members of ASEAN were young, newly independent states and developing economies in the 1960s, faced with the twin challenges of nation-building and securing their regimes from internal and external threats in a war-torn and insurgency-riven neighbourhood. Thus, it was natural that they saw security and development as indivisible concerns, where ‘comprehensive security’ meant not only freedom from external armed threat but also economic growth, internal political stability, social cohesion, and cultural harmony within their ethnically diverse societies. These factors were closely tied to national resilience and therefore regime legitimacy. Human security, apart from state security, entered into the discourses of community building. Each country bore the responsibility for achieving national resilience for its own population, but their success would redound to common and collective benefit in the form of regional resilience.

The other side of comprehensive security is that regional integration itself – with the increased transborder flows of people, money, and goods that it involved – created new problems and challenges. Many of the new security challenges have no regard for national boundaries, and the object of threat may not necessarily be states but non-state stakeholders such as communities or particularly vulnerable social groups. Amongst recent examples that ASEAN has confronted in recent years are global pandemics such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and avian flu, human trafficking, irregular migrants from the Indian Ocean, natural disasters such as Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar and Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, transnational crime,

and the effects of climate change on food and water security. Addressing these types of challenges required closer coordination and deeper cooperation amongst states, as well as between states and non-state actors.

For Mely Caballero–Anthony, moreover, one important contribution by ASEAN was the mainstreaming of these nontraditional security challenges as a common agenda for regional cooperation, not only amongst member states but especially involving the major powers whose own primary security interests and concerns lay elsewhere. One manifestation of ASEAN centrality, for instance, was how humanitarian assistance and disaster response had been built not only into new ASEAN arrangements created for such a purpose, but also into the agenda of the much more inclusive ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus, with active participation by the non-ASEAN partners.

Building the Regional Security Order

ASEAN states may not have been entirely successful in resolving some of their internal disagreements, or in transcending the more particularistic goals of the nation to support more wholeheartedly the region's collective interest. There are also questions about how serious the governments are in pursuing institutional reform and legalisation, as Tan See Seng explains in his chapter. But they have at least been quite successful in the establishment of multilateral security cooperation mechanisms that now form part of the foundation of regional security order. ASEAN's convening power or its ability to bring regional and extra-regional powers into its dialogue and consultation processes is a truly unique contribution and a valuable role that other more powerful parties would not have been able to play, given the persistent distrust amongst them. However, a key task for ASEAN, going forward, is to transform its role from that of a convenor to that of an agenda-setter for Southeast Asian security, which requires more unity of vision and purpose, and greater capacity as well as credibility, to accomplish.

The ARF, the ADMM, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) demonstrate how ASEAN-led regional security dialogues have successfully evolved into platforms for policy coordination and, increasingly, collective action. Alice Ba underscores how ASEAN introduced a regional-multilateral dimension to regional order that previously did not exist. ASEAN has also managed to 'condition' great powers to be 'more attentive to local and regional concerns and priorities'. Ba lauds how the ARF, notwithstanding later shortcomings, had been especially bold in its insistence that small and middle powers have 'an equal and even central standing' in the determination of participants, priorities, parameters, and frameworks for security cooperation.

ADMM and ADMM Plus, on the other hand, brought defence professionals of the region into processes that had long been dominated by diplomats, and in so doing led regional states towards more focused, task-oriented activities with both technical and political deliverables.

That said, it may seem to many observers that regionalism and multilateralism have rather taken a back seat in recent years, to the increasing salience of United States (US)–China big power competition and the reinvigoration of alliance ties together with power-balancing behaviour. Southeast Asia itself has become a major arena for geopolitical contestation because of its strategic position astride the South China Sea, and the fact that maritime and territorial disputes still persist between China and some ASEAN countries. China’s economic rise and rapid advances in military capability raise questions about its future role either as a benign and responsible power, or a power that might leverage its size and strength to assert influence or control at the expense of its neighbours’ sovereignty and of ASEAN’s collective autonomy. This places the spotlight on ASEAN’s capabilities to manage regional tensions while relying almost exclusively on its norms and diplomatic instruments.

In its external affairs, ASEAN’s brand of diplomacy has been characterised by inclusive multilateralism rather than exclusivist alliances, promoting confidence and cooperation rather than confrontation, engagement of all major powers rather than taking sides with one or the other, and reliance on dialogue and consultation rather than on material capability and coercion. Should ASEAN fail in promoting its own vision of regional order, amongst the possible scenarios of the future are increased competition amongst the major powers (primarily the US and China), or a concert or collusion between them. Both scenarios may marginalise ASEAN and upend decades of its efforts at securing its own autonomy and centrality in Southeast Asia’s regional affairs.

Should ASEAN be marginalised, the US-led hub-and-spokes alliance system is also not necessarily the only form of regional architecture, as China has been proactively seeking support for its own order-building initiatives. As Zhang Yunling and Wang Yuzhu write in this volume, ‘China also intends to reshape the existing order and to promote a new type of international relations based on partnership and cooperation. As a big rising power, China will surely play a more active and contributory role in international affairs in the future.’ In these two authors’ views, moreover, ASEAN plays an important role in China’s ‘grand strategy’ for continued economic growth and modernisation, whether in relation to ASEAN’s continuing advocacy for economic integration and open regionalism, in the management of the disputes in the South China Sea, or through support for Chinese leader Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road connectivity initiative. From the perspective of ASEAN Member States – notwithstanding how overall relations with

China have grown and economic ties in particular are now extremely significant – serious concerns remain regarding the future security relations. One example would be the South China Sea disputes.

The South China Sea Disputes: A Hard Test Case

The South China Sea disputes are no longer just a litmus test of China's cooperative or coercive behaviour towards its smaller neighbours, particularly those in ASEAN whose claims overlap with those of China. They are a test of its attitude towards ASEAN as a whole because of the prominence both ASEAN and China have given the issue in their relations over the years. Although China had insisted in the past that the sovereignty disputes should be solved only bilaterally by itself and other claimant states, it gradually arrived at a position that insofar as the disputes affect the stability of the region, they could be taken up with ASEAN. Thus China and ASEAN had agreed in 2002 on the Declaration of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, and continue to work towards a legally binding Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

The maritime disputes have also become a test case of the seriousness of the US' commitment to remain as Southeast Asia's preponderant power in the face of an increasingly capable and assertive China. While averring neutrality on the merits of the competing sovereignty claims, the Obama administration from 2010 and as part of its 'rebalance' to Asia began to take an active interest in the management of the disputes amid China's growing presence and activities. A critical question for the future of Southeast Asian security is whether Washington will ultimately give in to Beijing's apparent expectation and hope that the US respect the South China Sea as part of China's national interest, and recognise Southeast Asia as Beijing's strategic backyard or sphere of influence.

Two related developments in the last 3 years have compounded the importance of the South China Sea to the parties concerned. The first is the July 2016 ruling by an arbitral tribunal constituted upon Manila's request under the Annex VII provisions of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The tribunal essentially ruled that China's 'nine-dash line' claims, covering 85% of the South China Sea, are without historical or legal validity. From the perspective of international law, the decision is considered final and binding; however, from the realpolitik standpoint, it remains to be seen if it will be implemented, considering the asymmetry of power between China and the Philippines, and the lack of an international institution mandated to enforce it. Other ASEAN claimants appear to be studying the implications of the ruling on their own respective claims, but notably, except for Viet Nam, which was recently embroiled

in similar tensions with China, the reactions of ASEAN states to the ruling were muted. The Philippines itself, under freshly minted new president Rodrigo Duterte, chose to speak and act with much restraint following the announcement of the arbitral decision, to minimise backlash from China.

The second development is the fact that China has constructed on and fortified several reefs in the Spratlys that it has occupied since the 1980s. This move arguably appears to be a preemptive measure to limit the damage to China's interests of precisely such an outcome from the Philippines' legal actions, but it is clearly also a sign of China digging in, as well as a response to US 'freedom of navigation' operations, reinvigoration of alliances, and development of new security partnerships with maritime states in the region. The island construction activities have created a new status quo of potentially having a large Chinese armed presence in features and maritime areas that remain disputed with some ASEAN Member States, much further south towards Southeast Asia than they have ever been.

In light of ASEAN's efforts to build a political–security community, the South China Sea disputes will be a hard test case of ASEAN's capacity and will to resolve or manage disputes affecting not only member states' security and well-being, but also affecting regional peace and stability as a whole. The fact that non-ASEAN parties are involved also makes the South China Sea disputes a test of the efficacy of the multilateral security cooperation mechanisms, the leadership and centrality of ASEAN, the depth of ASEAN's shared norms and identity – including commitment to rules-based order, and the extent to which a logic of 'appropriateness' (i.e. normative motivations) rather than a logic of 'consequentiality' (i.e. material interests) has begun to take root in this region.

ASEAN itself and its non-claimant member states have rightly refrained from taking sides in the sovereignty disputes. However, following China's rejection of the arbitration ruling in the *Philippines v. China* case, the issue that arises is no longer neutrality vis-à-vis the respective sovereignty claims, but whether or not ASEAN actively takes the side of promotion of rules-based order, a principle now enshrined in the ASEAN Charter. In this regard, ASEAN's practices and tradition in past decades have shown that even its most enduring principles are applied in a flexible and pragmatic manner, rather than dogmatically, privileging the maintenance of harmonious relations amongst its members, and prioritising long-term effectiveness of its approaches to the management of disputes, rather than short-term gratification.

Following the 12 July 2016 release of the arbitration ruling, ASEAN issued a joint communiqué on 24 July, at the 49th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Vientiane, with the following statement:

We reaffirm our shared commitment to maintaining and promoting peace, security and stability in the region, as well as to the peaceful resolution of disputes, **including full respect for legal and diplomatic processes**, without resorting to the threat or use of force, in accordance with the universally recognised principles of international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). (Emphasis added)

The phrase 'full respect for legal and diplomatic processes' developed as a euphemism for the post-arbitration situation. ASEAN's support for rules-based order in the South China Sea is not merely based on normative notions of 'what ought to be', but will be critical to the region's practical efforts to prevent further militarisation and therefore escalation of conflict between the major powers. The alternative to encouraging compliance with the UNCLOS in general and with the arbitration ruling in particular would be to increase reliance on power balancing and to enhance preparation for military contingencies, especially should diplomacy between the US and China, between China and the Philippines, and between ASEAN and China, ultimately fail.

The South China Sea disputes have been amongst the most divisive of security issues for ASEAN, at certain points pitting claimants versus non-claimants; maritime versus mainland states; member states with close links to one power versus those who support the other power instead. In ASEAN's past management of consultations on this issue, there have been instances where disagreements prevented the issuance of a foreign ministers' joint statement (Phnom Penh, July 2012) – an unprecedented occurrence in the group's history; where a joint press statement was issued and then retracted (Kunming, June 2016), and where a Chairman's statement came only a day after the conclusion of a summit and where the language of a belatedly issued Chairman's statement appeared to sidestep positions that had already previously been agreed upon (Manila, April 2017).

Efforts to build unity of approach on the South China Sea disputes are expected to continue, and one is reminded of 2012 when Indonesian foreign minister Marty Natalegawa conducted shuttle diplomacy to forge consensus on certain principles after the debacle in Phnom Penh. More importantly, however, the unity and credibility of ASEAN must be pursued through its own effective and consistent compliance with its agreements to cooperate on maritime security, to strengthen the capacity of its institutions, and to keep a balance in its relations with other states.

Can and will ASEAN assert its centrality as the hub of multilateral security dialogues to bring the new situation in the South China Sea to the agenda of the ARF, ADMM Plus (and its Expanded Maritime Forum), as well as the East Asia Summit? While the disputes are not the only important agenda for cooperation with ASEAN's broader regional community, they are currently a flashpoint that might trigger actual armed conflict, if recent years' tensions and provocations persist. For ASEAN to abstain from taking leadership on this issue leaves the way open for the major powers to try to impose their own rules unilaterally, compete with each other for influence on how security order will be shaped, or collude with each other to try to find their own solutions. Whether major powers succeed in calming the seas or end up fueling even greater conflict, the management of the disputes and of the ocean itself would henceforth be defined by non-ASEAN actors, thus infringing on ASEAN's autonomy and marginalising ASEAN's brand of regional multilateralism within its own geographic domain.

ASEAN's contributions to the construction of a new regional security order, and the significance of the parallel multilateral cooperative security arrangements ASEAN had built since the end of the Cold War, will be measured and judged by success in dialing down the growing militarisation of the South China Sea, scaling back any excessive assertiveness of rising powers or excessive interventionism of established ones, developing balanced and cooperative relations with all its dialogue partners, and seizing the initiative to reclaim centrality, preserve autonomy, and, in the long run, keep to the path of neutrality that has long been a foundation of its identity.

If the ASEAN political–security community is to achieve its aspirations of becoming – without doubt or fear of regression – a 'no war' zone, we would do well to heed the words of Professor Wang Gungwu to pay close attention to the maritime domain. The South China Sea, too, must be secured as a 'no war' zone. Without peace and stability, and without a strong political–security community, ASEAN's vision of regional prosperity through the ASEAN Economic Community and solidarity as well as resilience through the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, will come to naught.

The APSC Towards 2025

Through its record of several decades of political–security cooperation, ASEAN has demonstrated that, notwithstanding shortcomings and challenges, shared norms and common interests are powerful forces that continue to bind countries and provide them an anchor upon which to face the future together. The first APSC Blueprint, covering the years 2009 to 2015, was intended to provide a roadmap and timetable to establish the APSC by 2015. It fell short of some of its action plans (notably, in my view, in the

promotion of human rights and cooperation for good governance); thus the APSC Blueprint 2025 acknowledges several areas where ASEAN has to exert much greater efforts to remain relevant and to build its Community successfully.

The vision remains one where the peoples of ASEAN live as a ‘united, inclusive and resilient community’, enjoying a ‘safe, harmonious and secure environment’, embracing tolerance and moderation as they uphold ASEAN’s fundamental principles, shared values, and norms. Translating such a vision into reality at the regional level presumes, in some cases, major normative and behavioural transformations amongst domestic elites and social groups, and ASEAN thus far contributes little to encouraging such changes amongst its member states, constrained in part by the principle of non-interference in internal affairs. In particular, building the political–security dimension of the ASEAN Community will also mean building from the ground up the social and political practices at the national level in support of:

- promotion and protection of human rights, fundamental freedoms, and social justice; and developing the domestic legal infrastructure for these;
- developing a people-centred and people-oriented bias in each national government’s policy priorities;
- pursuing a democratic, transparent, inclusive, rules-based approach to governance, with low tolerance for corruption and high standards of integrity;
- nurturing regional identity amid diversity.

By 2025, ASEAN also seeks to remain cohesive, responsive, and relevant in addressing challenges to regional peace and security, to play a central role in shaping the regional architecture, to deepen engagement with external parties, and to contribute collectively to global peace, security, and stability. The more important requisites for success include the following, as implicit in the Blueprint 2025 or emphasised by our authors in this volume:

- strengthening the commitment to inclusive multilateralism on the one hand and sustaining Southeast Asia’s regional autonomy on the other, and understanding their paradoxical relationship and significance given recent geopolitical developments such as resurgence of great power competition;
- fast-tracking improvements in ASEAN’s institutional capacity, including ensuring more effective organs and bodies, a more serious pace of implementation of agreements, as well as better coordination and work processes all around;
- developing effective mechanisms and institutions for the peaceful settlement of disputes, whether intra-ASEAN or those involving ASEAN and other extra-regional states;

- paying attention to both traditional threats and nontraditional security challenges, understanding their links, while exploring new innovative approaches to comprehensive security and common security; and
- channelling a constructive role and positive impact for the ARF, ASEAN Plus Three, ADMM Plus, and East Asia Summit as building blocks of the emergent regional order.

Fifty years since its founding in 1967, ASEAN has come a long way in building the foundations and the main pillars of Southeast Asia's regional community. Its brand of open regionalism – inclusive, moderate, flexible, and tolerant – has served its member states well, albeit arguably at some cost to ASEAN's collective impact and credibility. Yet ASEAN has survived inter-state wars, political pressure from big powers, civil conflicts, economic crises, pandemics, environmental challenges, and more. The next 50 years may be no different, or they may be more difficult given shifting geopolitical configurations, but ASEAN is bound to persist in simultaneously working to bring order to its own house while trying to be friendly and useful to its neighbours. In the meantime, 2025 is the next milestone that ASEAN can look forward to, and redoubling efficiency and fortifying credibility are amongst the major tasks ahead.