The Evolution and Limitations of ASEAN Identity

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The regional identity of Southeast Asia, one that yields the notion of Southeast Asia as a distinctive region and sets it apart from neighbouring regions such as South Asia or Northeast Asia, is not a given, and is not preordained. Nor is it based merely on the facts of geography, or shared historical, political, and cultural features and experiences. These are important but not sufficient conditions for regional identity. Rather, Southeast Asia's identity, which is the basis of the identity of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a regional organisation, is socially and political constructed, through interactions amongst its governments and societies. To the extent that it is a contrived but meaningful notion, ASEAN identity is also subject to challenge and change due to changing political, strategic, and economic currents in the region and beyond.

An important clarification: ASEAN identity is a reflection of Southeast Asian identity, but is not identical to it. Southeast Asia's regional identity anchors ASEAN's institutional identity. ASEAN is not a region; Southeast Asia is. ASEAN identity is more recent, more artificial, and more dependent on political and strategic forces than Southeast Asia's. Southeast Asia's regional identity is more enduring that ASEAN's, although the loss or weakening of ASEAN will adversely impact on Southeast Asian identity. But the key point here is that one cannot understand the nature of and prospects for ASEAN identity without considering the wider context of Southeast Asian identity within which it is nested.

Identity and Community

Identity is a complex and contested notion. In simple terms, identity refers to an actor's (which may be a person, group of persons, state, or group of states) sense of being unique or distinctive because of physical and social attributes, values, and patterns of behaviour. Identity is a function of two main factors, which are mainly subjective. One is how an actor sees itself. The second is how others or outsiders see that actor. The two are related but not identical. A person's or group's own sense of being distinctive may be stronger than the outsider's perception or recognition of it. For example, the sense of ASEAN identity is arguably stronger inside the grouping than when viewed by outsiders.

Why is identity important? Identity is key to building a community, whether economic, socio-cultural, or political-security varieties. A community has two key features. First, it implies a social, rather than purely instrumental, relationship. The key attributes of a community, to use American political scientist Ernst Haas' words, are 'trust, friendship, complementarity, and responsiveness'. (Haas, 1973: 116) Second, a community is not just a group of culturally similar people. While people in communities have cultural and physical attributes in common, they are also people who 'display mutual responsiveness, confidence, and esteem, and who self-consciously self-identify' (Puchala, 1984: 186–87).

Identity is socially constructed, combining instrumental logic with habit-forming socialisation, norms, and institutions. Moreover, such identity building is not entirely divorced from cultural and historical ties, but is reinforced by it. Simple proximity, historical ties, and shared culture are sufficient for identity. Their outcome can be indeterminate; proximity can lead to either war or peace; historical memories have been associated with war; and cultural ties do not make nations immune to conflict. One needs a sense of common or collective identity to build a true community, legitimise cooperation nationally and internationally, and reinforce the rationale for collective action.

Like a community, a regional identity can be imagined. Ben Anderson (1991) spoke of nationalism and the nation-state as 'imagined communities'. He referred to the role of print media, colonial administration, and elite socialisation in creating a sense of community amongst disparate and disrupted localities that formed the basis of the nation state. Just as nations are imagined, so can regions be. Southeast Asia is in many ways an imagined region; its experience of regional identity building can be likened to a quest for identity. Without forgetting the influence of historical interactions of its constituent units, Southeast Asia could not have been conceived except through

the imagination of historians (both Western and indigenous), imperial strategists in the late colonial era, and above all by the elites of ASEAN Member States. Hence, Singapore's first Foreign Minister and a founder of ASEAN, S. Rajaratnam, exhorted ASEAN members to recognise a 'regional existence', in addition to national ones – a kind of existential community. Others, including nationalist leaders, sought to return Southeast Asia to its pre-colonial ties through a regional organisation. Here, the actions of ASEAN's founders were purposive and rational. But they were also underpinned by a sense of history and identity. Its founders were 'imagining' themselves to be part of a collective entity, or a region, by drawing upon a shared historical heritage as well as identifying common goals in a contemporary setting.

Sources of ASEAN Identity

Southeast Asia, currently a region of 10 nations that comprise ASEAN, displays a remarkable degree of political, cultural, and economic diversity. Being located at the crossroads between China and India, and straddling the major sea lanes linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans, Southeast Asia is also exposed to a constant stream of external influences. Hence, ideas and identities in currency in Southeast Asia tend to be fluid and contested. Nonetheless, the growth of a long-term and relatively robust form of regionalism (ASEAN) has created a sense of regional identity alongside the still distinctive national identities of Southeast Asian countries (Acharya, 2000; Acharya, 2013).

Within this context, the identity of ASEAN emerged from the five major sources: nationalism, religion, cultural norms and modes of interaction, a modernist developmental state orientation and approach, and regionalism.

In the pre-colonial history of Southeast Asia, there is no equivalent of the virulent and bloody nationalisms that Europe, the birthplace of nationalism, experienced amongst its states. On the contrary, Southeast Asian nationalisms were the product of anti-colonial struggles, and hence directed against a shared external threat. All Southeast Asian countries were once part of Western colonial empires, except Thailand, which nonetheless ceded territory to them and was subjected to significant restraints on its freedom of external action. Moreover, anti-colonial sentiments were a powerful basis not only behind Southeast Asian nationalism, but also regionalism. In this sense, nationalism and regionalism in Southeast Asia were more complimentary than competitive (Acharya, 2000; 2013). The Cold War polarisation of Southeast Asia into pro-Western, pro-Soviet, and non-aligned orientations, was not really over nationalism, but security and domestic politics. Today nationalism is a source of tension in the region, especially in Thai–Cambodia relations (where it has fuelled an armed conflict over the

border temple of Preah Viehar), and to varying degrees in Thai–Myanmar, Singapore–Malaysia, Singapore–Indonesia, and Singapore–Philippines relations. But its impact in destabilising the region should not be overstated. A striking feature of Southeast Asia is that despite having been subject to both external colonialism and the intraregional imperialism of large pre-colonial states such as Angkor (Cambodia), Ava (Myanmar), Ayutthia (Thailand), Majapahit (Indonesia), Viet Nam (Dai Viet), and Malacca (Malaysia) there is nothing comparable here to the type of identity conflicts or 'history controversies' that are so salient in Northeast Asia between Japan and China, Japan and the Republic of Korea (henceforth, Korea), and even China and Korea, or in South Asia, as between India and Pakistan. Contrary to some pundits who sense a growing sense of competitive nationalism in Southeast Asia, I believe the milder form of competitive nationalism, which facilitated and was sustained by the emergence of ASEAN, is unlikely to give way to a pre-World War European type of nationalism.

Southeast Asia is home to several major religions, Buddhism is the religion of the majority in Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar; Islam of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam; and Christianity (Catholicism) of the Philippines. While religion is a strong factor in national identities, it has rarely been a source of major inter-state conflict. Rather, it has been a factor in domestic separatist movements, ethnic strife, and extremist violence. Islamic extremism, especially in and out of Indonesia, Malaysia, and southern Philippines, is often seen as a threat to regional stability. But in general, Southeast Asian Islam is more moderate and tolerant than that in the Arabian Peninsula. There is little evidence of any 'clash of civilizations' in Southeast Asia.

Cultural norms, to the extent they can be isolated from political ones, such as communitarianism, patron–client mind-sets, are important in the sense that they tend to modify more universalistic 'Western' ideas about economic development and governance, producing a tendency towards state-led capitalism and dominant-party political systems (in Malaysia, Singapore), military rule (Thailand), and other forms of 'illiberal democracy'. Some of these features are also present in Northeast Asia. The idea of 'Asian values', which actually originated in Southeast Asia, stresses 'society over the self', 'respect for authority', value attached to education, and propensity for high savings. But these norms are not uniformly present in all states and the very idea of 'Asian values', a relatively homogenous and pan-regional phenomenon, is a false construct, given the diversity of religious, political, and economic approaches in the region.

The developmental state orientation, which stresses a focus on economic growth over ideology and identity politics and calls for a strong role of the state in anchoring development, originated from Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore, and

now prevails throughout Southeast Asia, albeit to differing degrees. It helps to bridge the cultural, political, and security tensions amongst the Southeast Asian countries and constitutes a crucial basis for ASEAN.

Despite these aspects of diversity, Southeast Asia has arguably developed a relatively greater sense of a regional identity than South Asia or Northeast Asia. Indeed, the very idea of Southeast Asia as a region in itself, distinct from China and India, has much to do with the role of ASEAN, which expanded from five founding members (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines) in 1967 to now 10 nations in 1999 under the idea of 'One Southeast Asia'. National and regional identities co-exist and to some extent complement each other. ASEAN today is building three regional communities, covering political-security, economic, and socio-cultural affairs. Despite some internal divisions and constraints imposed by great power presence and influence-seeking, ASEAN remains amongst the most cohesive and dynamic regional groups in Asia and the world today. It is a key factor mediating the flow of ideas into and out of Southeast Asia and in reshaping the national identities of Southeast Asian states, making these national identities less exclusionary and conflictual. The 'ASEAN Way', referring to a distinctive mode of interaction, marked by informality, consensus, non-adversarial bargaining, and a preference for non-legalistic and non-binding approaches to problem solving (Acharya, 1997), has been an important source of regional collective identity with a growing relevance for the rest of the world in a post-Western world.

Some of these five sources of identity in Southeast Asia may be seen to be in tension, such as nationalism and regionalism, and religion and modernism. But remarkably, ASEAN nations have found a way to reconcile nationalism with regionalism to the extent that they exist in tandem and even complement each other. There is a degree of tension between religion and modernity, especially in Muslim majority societies such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei, but this has been managed by a shared commitment in the region to a broadly capitalist mode of economic development, if not political democracy.

The notion of identity suggests a relational view of a group's position and role. Identity building occurs when a given unit, or group of units (the Self) begins to define its character in relation to others. The identity of ASEAN depends on how its members define their character and role in regional order in relation to others within and outside the region, and how they develop a 'we' feeling.

As noted already, regional identity is not a cultural given, but something constructed out of self-conscious social interaction. Unlike rationalist theories of international relations, such as neorealism and neoliberalism, social theories, such as constructivism,

do not treat identity as a given, or fixed, but as being a constant state of 'process'. It is through socialisation that states develop collective identities that ameliorate the security dilemma. Socialisation processes may start even when the participating units lack significant structural commonalities, such as shared cultural heritage, similar political systems, or a common language. Collective identities are 'imagined' during, and as a result of, an actor's or group of actors' interaction within an institutional context. As such, the regional identity of Southeast Asia goes beyond a simple estimation of the structural similarities and differences amongst units, also known as the 'unity in diversity' approach. It should look not just at what is common between and amongst its constituent units, but how the countries of the region, especially the elite engaged in a process of socialisation within an institutional context (ASEAN) and in that processes 'imagined' themselves to be part of a distinctive region.

As historians of Southeast Asia remind us, before regionalism in its modern, institutional sense made its mark on the area east of India and south of China, 'region-wide' patterns of inter-state relations and a degree of interaction and interdependence did exist amongst the political units inhabiting what we call Southeast Asia today. Any serious study of Southeast Asia's international relations and its claim to be a region must therefore begin with a historical framework that includes the inter-state system during the pre-colonial period.' This is not to say that ancient Southeast Asians had imagined themselves to be part of a region. That sense of identity developed much later, with the emergence of Southeast Asian regionalism. Hence, so much of the focus of the book is on ASEAN.

Southeast Asian elites could see in the end of colonialism both an imperative and opportunity for reconstituting lost regional linkages and identities. The history of the international politics of Southeast Asia before and after 1967 offers plenty of evidence to support the existence of deliberate efforts to construct a regional 'identity'. They include the early days of the Asian Relations meetings in New Delhi, when delegates from Southeast Asia rejected associated too closely with the Indian and Chinese regional frameworks. The Declaration of ASEAN Concord, am important document of Southeast Asian regionalism signed by ASEAN's five original members in 1976, stated clearly that 'Member states shall vigorously develop an awareness of regional identity and exert all efforts to create a strong ASEAN community.' There is little question that a quest for regional identity played a causal part, as it had done in explaining ASEAN's rejection, about two decades earlier, of the membership application of Sri Lanka on the ground that it was not sufficiently 'Southeast Asian'.

Later, there was the deliberate inclusion of 'identity' in ASEAN's founding document, and the deliberations over, and further to, the carrying out of 'One Southeast Asia', despite the international censure of ASEAN's courting of Burma as part of this effort.

The need for regional identity was forcefully reaffirmed in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis and the adoption of the ASEAN Community framework in 2003. The 10th general principle of the Bali Concord II, adopted in 2003, proclaimed that 'ASEAN shall continue to foster a community of caring societies and promote a common regional identity.' Amongst the goals listed by the ASEAN Charter adopted in 2008: 'To promote an ASEAN identity through the fostering of greater awareness of the diverse culture and heritage of the region' (ASEAN Charter, 2007). ASEAN has since consistently stressed the slogan of 'One Vision, One Identity, One Community', in a good deal of its official statements and documents (ASEAN, 2015: 17).

Challenges to ASEAN Identity

Regional identity is to be treated neither as an accomplished project nor a permanent phenomenon. Southeast Asia has not completed the project of region building and has achieved the kind of regional identity that would survive the test of time. But it is a region in the making and this is owed largely to a significant and self-conscious effort at regional identity building, especially since the formation of ASEAN in 1967. It is the relative success and limitations of this effort, rather than material forces and circumstances facing the region, such as shifting patterns of great power rivalry, that explain many significant aspects of the international relations of Southeast Asia. In other words, instead of being presented as a given, regional identity is seen as an evolving phenomenon, something that is being aspired to and striven for by the region's states and societies. And it is these efforts towards identity which is the key force shaping the international relations of Southeast Asia. It is important to bear in mind that regional identity in Southeast Asia is a matter of building an 'imagined community'. The fact that an act of imagination does not always coincide with the reality does not negate the importance of the former as a causal force. The very concluding paragraph of my 2000 book, *The Quest for Identity*, holds that:

> ...it may be too optimistic to argue that the regional concept of Southeast Asia will become a permanent reality or endure indefinitely into the future. A lot will depend on external political (democratisation of political culture), economic (globalisation) and strategic (great power relations) events which are beyond the control of Southeast Asian countries. These events will offers alternative sources of identity, which could increase the diversity of Southeast Asia (Acharya, 2000).

Any theory of regional identity should account for its rise and decline. 'Nations come and go, why not regions?', asks Don Emmerson (1984: 20) The decline can respond to both material and ideational forces, both internal and external to the region. There are

a range of contributing factors, such as globalisation and the Asian economic crisis, the burdens imposed on ASEAN by membership expansion, the emergence of wider conceptions of regionalism driven by market integration, the challenge from a non-official regionalism to ASEAN's elitist and anti-democratic brand, and the intra-mural differences within ASEAN over the basic norms of sovereignty and non-interference in dealing with transnational issues. The study of regional identity should pay attention to the relationship between these forces and the question of identity. It fully accounts for ideational forces and the effects of these and material variables on the quality of socialisation.

Southeast Asia is getting more interdependent and integrated economically. The advent of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) by the end of 2015 aimed to create a single market of 600 million people with a combined gross domestic product of about US$2.5 trillion. The AEC aims at the free movement of goods, services, capital, and labour. Although not all these elements have been fully realised by the end of 2015, they are likely to be incrementally advanced during the next 2 decades or so.

But ASEAN's cohesion and identity faces a number of challenges. ASEAN as a regional body is facing a host of challenges, especially internal disunity fostered by the divisive policies of China in the context of an expanded membership, and the gap between capacity and the increasing number of transnational challenges it has to cope with. The principle of 'ASEAN centrality' in the Asia–Pacific or Indo–Pacific regional architecture that the United States (US) has supported can unravel if ASEAN's internal unity, now aggravated by Cambodia's turn to China and lack of Indonesia's leadership of ASEAN under President Jokowi. The weakening of ASEAN (a break up is unlikely) could have serious strategic and economic consequences for the region and the US. It would weaken conflict management norms and processes, set back the pace of economic integration, and allow China significantly greater inroads into the region.

First, challenges to domestic stability can spill over to threaten regional unity and identity. Southeast Asia is hardly new to ethnic strife and religious extremism. Armed separatist movements continue in southern Thailand and southern Philippines, where the majority of the local population is Muslim. The threat of Islamic extremism is present in Indonesia and Malaysia, with Myanmar witnessing a surprising degree of Buddhist radicalism. Islamic radicalism has a clear spillover potential due to its linkages with external forces, such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). On the positive side, the separatist movement in Indonesia's Aceh province has been resolved, along with pockets of extremist violence in Ambon and central Sulawesi and there is a promising peace process ongoing in the southern Philippines.

The next 2 decades will see the persistence of Islamic radicalism in Indonesia and Malaysia, but it will not threaten the survival or wellbeing of the nation-states. A potential surprise with major consequences could be the rapid growth of Islamic radicalism leading to the establishment of a Caliphate covering the Muslim nations of Southeast Asia. But this would require major changes to the economic and political systems of even the current Muslim majority states of the region, including Indonesia and Malaysia, which have come down hard on Islamic extremism.

A related challenge is nationalism. Nationalism will remain a powerful force, but not a threat to regionalism, which will grow, at least in the economic arena. The region will continue to be pro-Western overall, but within limits. If the US–China rivalry intensifies or if the US pushes too hard on its rebalancing strategy, it might trigger a latent norm of keeping clear of power blocs – Eastern or Western.

Third, the ASEAN identity suffers from a disjuncture between the official ASEAN and the people's ASEAN, despite the framework of an ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. The notion of a 'socio-cultural community' does not simply mean recognising extant social and cultural similarities amongst societies and states. It requires a conscious desire and effort to engage in interactions in a variety of areas, such as arts, education, tourism, etc. that promote mutual understanding amongst societies and create a 'we feeling'. But who are 'we'? True socio-cultural communities need to be bottom-up, rather than top-down. As Linklater (1990: 150–51) pointed out, the true meaning of community involves identity amongst peoples, and not just states. To be a socio-cultural community, a regional organisation must shed its elite-driven agenda and identity.

People do matter in regional construction. This brings up an especially important challenge for ASEAN. According to the ASCC Blueprint:

> The primary goal of the ASCC is to contribute to realising an ASEAN Community that is people-centred and socially responsible with a view to achieving enduring solidarity and unity among the nations and peoples of ASEAN by forging a common identity and building a caring and sharing society which is inclusive and harmonious where the well-being, livelihood, and welfare of the peoples are enhanced.

Developing true regional identity would require greater interactions and identifications at the popular level, to make ordinary people in ASEAN identify with the regional entity, and not just national ones (the two can co-exist, however). ASEAN has done little thus far to draw in the citizenry and the civil society into the ambit of regional interactions.

Today, a variety of associations affiliated with the ASEAN Secretariat do work relevant to the creation of a regional socio-cultural community. As of November 2015, there were 52 entities listed under the category of ASEAN Accredited Civil Society Organisations:

■ Air Asia Foundation
■ ASEAN Confederation of Women's Organisation (ACWO)
■ ASEAN Fisheries Federation (AFF)
■ ASEAN Music Industry Association (AMIA)
■ ASEAN Ports Association (APA)
■ Southeast Asia School Principals Forum (SEASPF)
■ Veterans Confederation of ASEAN Countries (VECONAC)
■ ASEAN Cosmetics Association (ACA)
■ ASEAN Vegetable Oils Club (AVOC)

There is also the ASEAN Arts Festival, ASEAN Travel Agents Association, and more recently the ASEAN Peoples' Congress. But the reach of these groups into the hearts and minds of ordinary people remains limited and they have not created a sense of community from below. Hence, if ASEAN is to be true to its vision statement, and develop, by 2020, 'an ASEAN community conscious of its ties of history, aware of its cultural heritage and bound by a common regional identity,' there needs to be more involvement of functional, professional, and non-governmental organisations, including those dealing with transnational issues such as the environment, humanitarian assistance, and poverty-alleviation.

A fourth challenge to ASEAN identity comes from inter-state disputes. Despite all the talk about intra-ASEAN feuding, inter-state conflicts within ASEAN are milder (notwithstanding the Thai–Cambodia conflict over Preah Vihear) than in any regions of the world, with the exception of Western Europe and South America. Surely, they pale in comparison with other subregions of Asia, such as South Asia, where the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has come to a grinding halt due to India–Pakistan rivalry. In Northeast Asia, the intense territorial dispute (over the Senkaku–Daiyutai islands) between China and Japan and the issue of historical memory has precluded the creation of any subregional organisation. But the South China conflict involving several ASEAN members and China is impacting intra-ASEAN relations. This is compounded by the challenge to ASEAN's unity and identity posed by the rise of China and the growing great power rivalry in the region. China's expansive territorial claims in the South China Sea and its increasing assertiveness may be the single most important security challenge to the region. That and the US policy of 'rebalancing' aimed at countering Chinese influence with direct and indirect support from Japan, India,

Singapore, and Australia, has created the prospect of a new round of great power rivalry in a region that is no stranger to great power geopolitics (Acharya, 2015).

The rise of China is not only a military or economic challenge to the ASEAN identity. It is also an ideational one. Some aspects of the traditional Chinese worldview and foreign policy approach, such as the *Tianxia* ('all under heaven') and the Tributary System are increasingly finding their way into the academic and policy debates in the region and may find greater resonance in Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand and even Singapore (whose overtly pro-Western security posture is not matched by an embrace of Western liberal values). But a Chinese or Confucian ideational framework enveloping Southeast Asia is extremely unlikely, even in the Confucian states like Viet Nam and Singapore. Despite the historical influence of China and its growing economic clout and military reach, Southeast Asia will not adopt a Sinic identity, or turn into a modern Chinese culture area, for structural, strategic and economic factors to be discussed below.

In this context, the biggest and most serious surprise with far reaching consequences for Asia and the world would be the growth of Chinese influence to the extent that it reproduces the old tributary system or a Monroe Doctrine line sphere of influence over Southeast Asia. Indeed, many Western commentators have already alluded to this possibility. China's relative economic and military power over Southeast Asia combined is huge and a sphere of influence could come about if Western nations, especially the US disengages from the region out of domestic neo-isolationism or some sort of implicit understanding with China. But I think this scenario is unlikely due a host of factors. The ASEAN countries highly value their sovereignty. They have rejected great power hegemony from Western or Asian nations in the post-Second World War period, except when it is temporarily expedient or left with no other alternative. While Southeast Asian countries will hope for not having to choose sides between China and the US, they (with insignificant opportunistic exceptions like Cambodia and the Lao PDR) will be even less willing to live under a Chinese sphere of influence or a Monroe Doctrine. The countervailing military and economic presence of the US, India, Japan, and other Western nations will further stifle any Chinese efforts to impose a sphere of influence and there is little sign that Beijing is seeking such an outcome.

ASEAN countries in general would seek accommodation, rather than confrontation with or containment of China, even with respect to the South China Sea dispute. But the rise of China is unlikely to have a bandwagon effect either ideationally or strategically in the sense that the majority of ASEAN members would be tempted to or coerced into aligning with China and its domestic values and foreign policy objectives and depart from the main principles or norms of existing liberal international order.

Despite China's efforts to provide regional public goods through initiatives, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and One Belt, One Road, most Southeast Asians are unlikely to embrace these parallel institutions at the expense of existing global and regional bodies. Examples of these bodies are the Asian Development Bank (ADB), ASEAN Economic Community, or global bodies like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and their bilateral ties with donor nations such as Japan, the European Union, and the US. ASEAN will remain wedded to the principle of 'open regionalism' by seeking and finding a common ground between existing global institutions and the new and emerging regional initiatives, including the Chinese-led ones.

Another rising Asian power, which has historically exercised a powerful influence over Southeast Asia, is India. Trade and military interactions between India and ASEAN are growing fast, although nowhere close to the economic ties between ASEAN members and China. While Indian ideas of the past, such as Hindu–Buddhist ideas of kingship and legitimation, have shaped the polities of classical Southeast Asia – albeit through a non-coercive process of voluntary adaption – modern India's ideals such as democracy and religious tolerance already have a fair bit of resonance in Southeast Asia. They do not present an alternative to Western or universal ideals, but complement them. If anything, great ideational interactions between Southeast Asia and India, as may be happening now, is highly desirable for the US and the West. India could also play the role of a 'balancer' to China in Southeast Asia, as some Southeast Asian leaders have hoped for and explicitly sought by inviting India to join regional institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit.

Conclusion

ASEAN's quest for a regional identity has come a long way. The desire for regional autonomy and identity that its founders aspired to and worked on did provide a normative space to articulate the *regionness* of Southeast Asia, deepen regional cooperation, and build at least a nascent community. The post-Cold War evolution of ASEAN has led to an effort to deepen that sense of identity, especially with the advent of the principle of ASEAN centrality in the Asia–Pacific regional architecture. With this, ASEAN sought to play a managerial role in the wider region featuring the major powers of the day. They were drawn into the ASEAN-led social processes of interaction that have shaped their policy towards the region.

But ASEAN's identity-building project is now being challenged by both internal and external challenges, including intra-ASEAN tensions, the rise of China and India, economic globalisation, transnational threats, and the spectre of renewed great power

(US–China) rivalry. Unless nurtured through greater cohesion and purpose, ASEAN's normative influence would give in to a balance of power dynamics dominated by the great powers at the expense of the region's weaker states. A loss of identity, i.e. ignoring or marginalising ASEAN as the cornerstone of a member states' foreign policy, could not only unravel ASEAN itself, but the relevance of ASEAN-led institutions built around it, such as APT, ARF, and EAS. Maintaining and strengthening that regional identity is thus a crucial challenge and key to ASEAN's future relevance. This would be unfortunate since the ASEAN Way of non-hegemonic and pluralistic leadership style and the inclusive approach to cooperation provides a better fit for the realities of the emerging world order than the old style leadership of the American-led liberal world order.

As noted at the outset, the identity of Southeast Asia as a region should not be confused with the identity of ASEAN as a regional organisation. Although the two identities can overlap and be mutually reinforcing, they also have different sources and distinctive trajectories. Southeast Asia's regional identity predates ASEAN's identity; it existed even when ASEAN was a group of only five nations. While ASEAN might have strengthened Southeast Asia's regional identity, the latter has a wider basis. It was constructed by a combination of outside powers, foreign (at first) and local academics, regional political leaders, and civil society groups, while the ASEAN identity is mainly the creation of the region's political elite. The Southeast Asian identity is more grounded in historical and socio-cultural factors than the ASEAN identity, which is more of an institutional, political, and strategic phenomenon and is fundamentally statist and elitist in nature. Hence, although both identities have their limitations, the Southeast Asian identity is potentially more robust and enduring than the ASEAN identity, and could outlive the weakening or unravelling of ASEAN. While the two identities converged after the end of the Cold War and the emergence of the ASEAN–10, they have recently begun to diverge, due to growing intra-regional squabbles and great power competition. The challenge for the region's policymakers and civil society is to ensure the convergence of the two identities with policies that sustain ASEAN's unity and neutrality in the great power rivalry, while at the same time expanding ASEAN's support base by seeking the participation of the people and the civil society of the region.

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