

Imperatives for a New ASEAN Leadership: Integration, Community, and Balance

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Introduction: Leadership Offered But Not to be Taken for Granted

A form of leadership is offered today by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This is not only internally, amongst its 10 smaller and medium-sized members, as they move to develop a community amongst themselves. ASEAN leadership is also offered to the wider Asia-Pacific, a region that includes the United States (US) as well as China and other rising and middle powers.

The internal relevance and leadership of ASEAN for its own members is increasing. The ASEAN Charter, agreed in 2008, has created a stronger foundation for the group (Lee, 2011) and an ASEAN Community was inaugurated at the end of 2015 (ASEAN, 2015a), committing countries to even closer cooperation and integrative efforts. These efforts are not only in the economic realm, but also include political-security and socio-cultural issues.

The acceptance of ASEAN leadership externally, by more powerful states in the Asia-Pacific, has been in evidence for more than a decade. Collectively, the group convenes the leading multilateral summits and ministerial meetings of the region, bringing together key actors and the wider community of states to discuss vital strategic issues. ASEAN has developed considerably from its start in 1967. Yet ASEAN's relevance and leadership – internal and external – are neither natural nor are they to be taken for granted as permanent.

ASEAN's 'external' leadership in the Asia-Pacific is under pressure at present, perhaps more so than at any other time since the creation of the different fora that the group

convenes. Contentious issues and competitive pressures are rising in the region today and there are growing demands for the security arrangements in the region to change and evolve to help deal with them. There are rising expectations to move beyond diplomatic discussion aimed at building trust, towards action or, at least, to bring greater focus and candour to deliberations on the most sensitive issues (Tay, 2016a).

At the time of writing, these forces are especially strong. First, within Asia, the South China Sea issues have come to a boil with the decision reached in the Permanent Court of Arbitration, in a case pursued by the Philippines against China, and Beijing's responses to the outcome of the ruling (Tay, 2016b). Secondly, there are a number of uncertainties that arise from the US Presidential election. President-elect Donald Trump had, on the election trail, criticised America's traditional alliances and relations with China, and promised to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership that was laboriously negotiated (Trump, 2016).

ASEAN ties with the US had grown exceptionally under the Obama presidency with a US-ASEAN Summit and his regular attendance at the East Asia Summit hosted by the group (Tay, 2016c). These are not vouchsafed as permanent on the incoming President's agenda. For ASEAN-China relations, signs are that these are coming to a juncture with an increased effort by China to selectively engage and favour those ASEAN members that are more open to cooperation and assistance, with financial assistance, infrastructure, and preferences for trade and tourism.

Closer ties with China as a major and neighbouring economy are not in themselves of concern and indeed should be welcomed as natural. However, China's selectivity may pressure efforts to keep the diverse members of ASEAN united as a community.

Despite ASEAN's promises, the fact is that the 'internal' relevance of ASEAN Community to each of its members remains a distant second to national politics and policy priorities within each member state. Even when ASEAN acts collectively, member governments and the rotating ASEAN chair for the year continue to play a much larger role than the ASEAN Secretariat led by the Secretary-General. ASEAN is far from being a supranational body with a 'pooled sovereignty' in the style of the European Union and need not mimic others. But if it is to be relevant and to lead in these times of change and challenge, ASEAN has to find its own clear path to move ahead collectively to deepen the ASEAN Community.

It is in this context that this chapter seeks to discuss ASEAN's leadership for the future. I aim to look forward in a 10-year frame at both 'internal' and 'external' aspects of ASEAN leadership. Accordingly, parts of this chapter must briefly sketch the normative

futures of ASEAN's leadership in the Asia-Pacific. I will try to suggest the kinds of outcomes that ASEAN should prefer and others that it should avoid, and the aims and means to try to move towards the preferred outcomes. Much of this is focused on ASEAN's role vis-à-vis the major powers, and with an emphasis on politics and security. Consequently, the norms, methods, and institutions of ASEAN are also called into focus. The potential for ASEAN to take up a global role is also briefly discussed.

The chapter will also discuss ASEAN's 'internal' leadership amongst its own members. Much has already been done to assist the transformation of the once troubled and war-torn Southeast Asia into one of the most dynamic and fastest growing regions in the world (HV, Thompson, and Tonby, 2014). Looking ahead, this chapter will consider future ways in which this can be further developed. This furthers policy prescriptions made for ASEAN's development since the 1997-1998 crisis and the turn of the last century, when calls were made by this author and others for ASEAN to be 'reinvented' (Tay, 2001).

Particular policy choices remain to be debated but an emerging need for a more truly regional perspective can be discerned – an overarching ASEAN interest is considered, above and beyond what each of the 10 member states deems to be in its own national interest. In line with this, it will need to be considered how to augment the ASEAN Secretariat, as many call for, to differing degrees. The chapter also briefly considers hopes for a 'People's ASEAN' (ASEAN, 2015b) that have been expressed by some to have the organisation represent not only the governments but also the peoples of the region more directly.

However, with the comfort that people-centric views of ASEAN are offered at greater length in other contributions to this volume, this present chapter does not imagine a people-centred utopian view. Nor do I argue that ASEAN must model itself on the European Union with its high degree of institutionalisation, bureaucratisation, and regulation. This chapter does suggest how the 'ASEAN Way' can and should evolve to be more relevant and support ASEAN's leadership role but my writing will begin from ASEAN in its current state-centric forms and seek to suggest more incremental steps.

I recognise that my thinking on what ASEAN can and should be differs markedly from those who begin their 'constructivist' analysis of ASEAN as being a 'quest of identity' (Acharya, 2000). This chapter is instead shaped by the view that ASEAN at present remains an ongoing and unfinished work, and one that was created and is still very much shaped by its member states, considering their national needs and interests and what the 10 of them can best do together. The ASEAN of today and in the foreseeable future is, to me, more a question of functionalist thinking in the context of increasing

interdependence. Changes and efforts to reinvent ASEAN in my thinking should derive from this recognition of the group's interdependence and the 'functionalism' of cooperation and collaboration so that the group provides what none of the members can individually do.

Additionally, this chapter is shaped by my view that much of what ASEAN can or cannot do, or even what the group aspires towards, will be shaped by what happens at the national level in the different member states and also by events and trends in the Asia-Pacific and global communities. In this sense, my perspective is to see ASEAN not in isolation but at the mid-level – above the national level of each of its members and below the wider Asia-Pacific and global levels.

In the first part, the chapter will consider the 'external' relevance and leadership role ASEAN could have in the Asia-Pacific in future and, more briefly, the prospects of a global voice and role for ASEAN. The second part of the chapter will focus on ASEAN's internal relevance and leadership amongst its member states, considering institutional and normative changes and how the external and internal characters of ASEAN leadership may overlap. Having sketched trends and directions for a medium- to longer-term future, the conclusion, which provides other suggestions on policy and practices, outlines the importance of national governments and political elites as key actors and decisive factors that will help shape the nature of a new ASEAN leadership.

External Leadership: ASEAN and the Great Powers

To assert ASEAN leadership in the Asia-Pacific was not a norm in the first decades of the group and still remains subject to much debate today. By measures of power in security, politics, and economics, ASEAN – even collectively – is not a major power. The idea of ASEAN leadership in the region only really gained acceptance from the latter part of the 1990s and into the first decades of the 21st century. It arose and grew under a particular set of conditions and these conditions still impact whether ASEAN leadership can be sustained.

The US has been the main power in the region since the end of World War II and its role is embedded in military and security alliances with both Northeast and Southeast Asian countries (Tay, 2010). To many, especially realists and military analysts, these remain the foundation for stability in the region. These expectations have been impacted by a number of developments over the past decade.

The first is the global financial crisis that began at the end of 2008 and has, while avoiding an American and global recession, led to a downward revision not only of US economic growth but also its self-assurance in dealing with the rest of the world (Tay, 2010). The second is the 2016 US presidential election that was won by Donald Trump whose campaign slogan was to ‘Make American Great Again’, and whose electioneering comments criticised China as a ‘currency manipulator’ (Vaishampayan, 2016) and suggested that alliances with Japan and the Republic of Korea (henceforth, Korea), and the Trans-Pacific Partnership economic pact negotiated by the Obama administration was not to in the interest of the US (Woolf, McCurry, and Haas, 2016).

At the time of writing, weeks before he takes office, there is no clarity on the precise policies of the Trump administration. However, in a longer-term historical view, we can conclude that the US has gone from a factor of stability for the region to a question mark and potential factor of instability. The Trump presidency in this regard raises the level of doubt about the US as a dependable and always present power in the region and as an active and positive participant in its dynamic growth. If so, the ‘pivot’ to Asia that the Obama administration had declared the US to be and that many, including this writer, welcomed may seem something of an aberration and an anomaly over a longer-term trend.

The region today is also experiencing a new dynamic of power with the rise of China, the resurgence of Japan under Prime Minister Abe, and the promise of India. At no time has Asia witnessed these major countries be as strong and also as cooperative. ASEAN-led forums and meetings started emerging in the late 1990s. But in this context of power – current and rising, established, and competitive – these are seen by many as supplementary, or indeed by still harsher critics as ephemeral.

The meetings and processes include the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and ASEAN Defence Ministers + 8 (ADMM+8) meetings, as well as free trade agreements that ASEAN has with key countries. The EAS brings in the key countries at the highest level to discuss key strategic issues in the region. The ARF, working at the level of foreign ministers, casts a much wider net, with some 27 members to discuss key issues and develop understanding and trust in a context of cooperative security. The ADMM+8 involves fewer countries – 18 – but with its focus on security and military agencies, it is taking steps towards building trust through joint exercises in fields such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. In the field of economic integration, ASEAN centrality can be observed in the fact that the group has ‘Plus One’ free trade agreements with all major regional economies, even when there is no pan-Asian agreement or even a trade agreement between Northeast Asian neighbours.

Underlying these summits and agreements, we can discern a broad acceptance of ASEAN centrality in the political, security, and economic issues of the region. Major powers look to ASEAN in addressing not only issues within Southeast Asia but also outside the region. This belies the fact that ASEAN is not a security power or large economy compared with others.

These ASEAN-led initiatives are set in a much larger region that is experiencing dynamic growth, but has also seen increasing tensions amongst major powers (Collinson, 2016). Moreover, they exist in relation to and to some degree in competition with other forms of interstate cooperation in the region, perhaps most notably the US-centric military alliances that have undergirded security for many since the end of World War II and, in many respects, remain a fundamental cornerstone of stability (Tay and Tan, 2015).

Only some of these conditions were internal to ASEAN. Other conditions relate to the major powers in the region. In this regard, ASEAN leadership as it evolved and is presently practised depends only in part on what ASEAN itself does. As much and perhaps more depends on how major powers concerned with the region behave, amongst themselves and in relation to ASEAN. Several of the conditions that allowed ASEAN leadership to arise in the late 1990s and into the first decade of the new century are changing.

In Table 1, I summarise a number of these factors and the changes that have impacted the role of ASEAN as a leader for the region from the 1990s to 2010, as well as factors that have emerged from 2010 that can lead to more or less favourable outcomes for ASEAN's role:

Perhaps the clearest example of how external powers impact ASEAN leadership arises in relation to the disputes in the South China Sea, especially following the arbitration in the Philippines case against China (Campbell, 2016). Officially, China has continued to pledge to support and value ASEAN centrality and leadership. Yet in several meetings that have touched on these disputes, there have been reports that Chinese lobbying and pressure have divided ASEAN with the result that ASEAN is unable to arrive at a consensus statement (Sim, 2016). Bilaterally, China has also reached out selectively to different ASEAN members to offer trade, infrastructure, and other forms of cooperation and assistance through the Asian Infrastructural Investment Bank (AIIB). In themselves such offers are beneficial, but there is a sense that they are often tied politically and even that Beijing seeks to dominate the relationship to secure or protect its interests.

Table 1: External Factors Impacting ASEAN Leadership

	1990s to 2010	From 2010	
		Unfavourable to ASEAN	Benign or Favourable to ASEAN
US Policy in Asia	A confident, unilateral America	A self-serving and aggressive America (or conversely, a more isolationist America)	An engaged and multilateral America
China Policy in the near abroad	Peaceful rise of China	Assertive and rule challenging China	A responsible stakeholder China
China-US Relationship	Recognised interdependence	Regional and global competition for influence (or conversely, a G2 condominium)	A deepening interdependence, with recognition of roles and interests of others
Other Major Powers	The limited role of others – with Japan’s period of no and slow growth and India’s limited inclusion and activity in Asia	Resurgent Japan focused on security role India and others in democratic alliance	Re-engaged Japan with Abenomics A non-exclusive Asian regionalism (SIIA, 2014a)

ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations; US = United States.

Source: Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA), 2016.

Beijing is not of course the only major power that does so. Another example is the US effort to re-strengthen its military alliances with Japan, Korea and, perhaps most notably, the Philippines under the recent Aquino administration (Bacani, 2015). These efforts are seen to be taken in response to steps by China in the seas and air spaces of the region, even if these are not the intention of the parties.

In economics too, there is a sense of competition. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), pushed by the US and later Japan to create deeper economic integration on a negotiated and rules-based order excludes China. The TPP also includes four ASEAN Member States but not others, most notably the two largest economies in the group – Indonesia and Thailand – and this, from some perspectives, creates tension with the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). The Chinese initiatives with the vision of ‘One Belt, One Road’ and the newly established AIIB are seen to offer an alternative engine for economic development to the region, driven by connectivity (Das, 2015).

The push by a major power to protect what it considers to be its own ‘core’ interest can, intentionally or otherwise, undermine ASEAN unity and therefore put its leadership at stake. Instead of undermining the group, major powers can support ASEAN leadership by engaging its members more deeply and with a greater appreciation of the interests

and concerns of the region, even when those interests overlap and compete with their own. Major powers must also manage their own relations better as a sense of competition and rivalry can have negative spill over effects on the region.

An isolationist US can undermine not only its own role in the region but also unbalance the conditions that allow ASEAN to play its role. Conversely, an aggressive US that seeks to reassert its hegemony to protect and push forward its own narrow interests (rather than create regional public goods) can also upset the region and undermine ASEAN's role. The same might also be said about the other major powers – China or Japan under Abe, or even India.

The recognition of the great impact that external conditions can have on ASEAN and its leadership does not mean ASEAN's role should be discounted when considering ASEAN's relations with any single major power. The interactions between these major powers and ASEAN will be a further dimension of analysis for ASEAN's future role as a leader. In this regard, it is not only America's Asia policy or China's expansive relations with its near abroad that we need to consider, or even the US–China relationship. We also have to look at US–China–ASEAN, and other triangulations.

The question becomes even more complex when we consider ASEAN not only as a collective, but in relation to the bilateral relations between some ASEAN members and the major powers. The US–Philippines relationship under the Aquino administration has impacted not just the two countries but also ASEAN, China, Japan, and others. The sharp change of tack by his successor, President Duterte, will similarly cause ripples (Parameswaran, 2016).

Relations in the Asia–Pacific have not been settled and, for the reasons outlined above, are in fact becoming more tumultuous. The role of ASEAN in providing leadership to the region is one based more on the perception of need and some utility – especially by the major powers – rather than on the inherent strengths of the group. That role has endured thus far, but can, if circumstances shift sharply and strongly, be diminished.

ASEAN's Internal Dynamics and the Internal Conditions for Leadership

While external conditions have been critical, this is not to say that the ASEAN leadership that has emerged from the 1990s was automatic and pre-destined. There have been times when it seemed that ASEAN might fail even in respect of its own sub-region and the needs felt amongst its members. It has taken political will not just to envision the way

ahead but also to move concretely forward. Although not all the factors for success lie within the control of ASEAN members, it would be too cynical and fatalistic to believe that the group is entirely unable to shape its own destiny.

What values ASEAN and its members ascribe to, and what policies the grouping implements, can and should matter. First and foremost, it will matter to its members inter se, or in their relations with each other. The second and related impact will be on the hopes that ASEAN continues to play a leadership role in the wider region. These ‘internal conditions’ for leadership are subject to the national priorities of the 10 member states of the group and therefore must deal with a deep and abiding diversity across so many elements of government, economy, and society.

Even if there is an acceptance that a united ASEAN can serve each member better, there will be many challenges in moving forward at a pace that allows the group to remain relevant in a time of tumult. One of the key ongoing challenges for ASEAN in moving forward is to assess the principles and practices that have accrued and served the group thus far and reach a working consensus on which of these must be retained, reformed, or else retired, for a better future. The ASEAN Charter of 2008 did not take up this challenge but it has served the region well in two ways. Firstly, by setting out these principles in fixed terms in a legally binding treaty, it has encapsulated them and thus created a stable foundation for future review and reform (SIIA, 2014b). Secondly, while long held principles were enshrined in the Charter, newer goals and principles have also been introduced; these include, for example, references to becoming a globally competitive and integrated economy, and to promoting democracy, good governance, and human rights (ASEAN, 2015a).

Critiques of ‘the ASEAN way’ are common. I do share some of these concerns, but I often find my views differ in terms of what policies would be required as the group moves ahead. Some critics of ASEAN suggest that the policy of non-intervention must be abandoned together with consensus-decision making. Further, there are those who wish to see a far stronger and larger ASEAN Secretariat, empowered to take much more initiative on behalf of member states. In such critiques of ASEAN, it has been an easy shorthand to use the European Union and its Commission as a model – often an idealised model – of comparison (Jetschke and Murray, 2012).

My own thinking differs. Thinking about ASEAN’s future leadership, we must of course closely evaluate the past principles and not simply enshrine and reify them. However, there are questions of political reality as well as political imagination. The political reality is that the project of ASEAN’s future must be agreed by its members and such agreement must be at a deep level if it is to guide actual ASEAN practice in the future.

It is not uncommon for a treaty to be formally agreed on paper, only for its terms to be left moribund in reality. The political imagination that must be sought is to consider how ASEAN can change organically, rather than for change to be imposed based on the European Union model, in ways that respond to the group's roots as well as its ongoing effort to grow into the future.

In this, any future aspirations for ASEAN must take into consideration that national interests will continue to prevail. Indeed, the global trend – even in Europe – may be in the direction of a more strident and often protectionist nationalism. Any project for a 'regional identity' will continue to be uphill – even if we should continue to recognise that need and recommit to greater cross-border understanding and empathy. Projects to help nations manage their independencies and to increase the regional public goods functionally will also require effort but may be more easily aligned to the existing national ethos. This is particularly the case in areas where – as with much of economic competitiveness or indeed the political and convening power of the group – there is an acceptance of the overarching logic that a united ASEAN will do better than any member can do individually (Tay and Tan, 2015).

How might the tension between past and emerging principles and objectives be creatively used and resolved? Driven by ASEAN's economic, political, and social needs, rather than a quest for identity, what can be imagined in a Future ASEAN project?

One line of thinking – summarised in Table 2 – is to begin with the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), as the pillar within the overall ASEAN Community that has the clearest time lines and measurable achievements. It was inaugurated at the end of 2015 and has a roadmap to 2025 (ASEAN, 2015c). The overarching goal of the AEC is to integrate the economies of the 10 member countries of ASEAN, creating economies of scale to become more competitive, especially in relation to China and India. To make progress and have a realistic chance to accomplish that aim, the AEC will require and drive changes in the ways ASEAN operates. One example is in the way the undertakings and obligations of member states are monitored, reported, and discussed.

Such changes need not be limited to the economic sphere. Given the concurrent commitment to develop the political-security and the socio-cultural aspects of the ASEAN community, there is every reason to expect positive spillovers from the AEC to influence thinking and practice in the other areas of ASEAN activity and competence. One place where it seems most necessary to start is in respect of what I refer to as the 'human face' of the AEC, i.e. the issues of sustainability and social issues, such as the impact on incomes and livelihoods, that flow in tandem with the AEC. The existing ASEAN agenda already has taken on board issues such as small and medium enterprises,

the migration of labour, human trafficking, trade and the environment. What can and should be done next regarding the ‘human face’ of ASEAN is to bring these together under a centralising theme and to underscore their relation to steps taken in the AEC. As the ASEAN economies integrate this approach would respond to the social and environmental questions arising from the region’s economic development.

Table 2: Inter ASEAN Principles and Emerging Needs

	Evolution of ASEAN since Inception of Current ASEAN Community	Needs of an Emerging ASEAN Community
Economic Growth	Diverse from low to high; not well integrated but with plans for increasing connectivity	Increased connectivity and integration with well-spread, interdependent growth that outperforms other economies
Foreign Direct Investment	Negative competition and nervous nationalism	Win-win, interdependent value chain, and confident regionalism
Domestic Governance and Democracy	Diverse with stalled reform and complicated domestic politics	Linkage of AEC to domestic governance and the ‘human face’ of AEC in terms of sustainability and human issues such as equity, SMEs, and migrant workers Commitment and progress on reform and modernisation, especially in key countries
Foreign Policy	National interest with regional concerns to enhance sovereignty Norms of neutrality and peace ASEAN-5 coalition over Cambodian question Divided views on major power influences	Increasing recognition of regional interest while respecting the most sensitive national priorities Increased sharing of views about major power influences
Global Voice	G20 membership for Indonesia and attendance for ASEAN (and Singapore) Little coordination at UN and other multilateral forums	Shared views on key issues, increasing dialogue and coordination at G20 and other key forums
Policy Implementation	Non-binding, political process with minimal monitoring	Rules-based with reference to ASEAN Charter for monitoring and compliance (SIIA, 2014b)
Decision-making	Consensus and run by national governments	Flexible process supervised by leaders and ASEAN ministers with closer monitoring by ASEAN Secretariat or other appointed bodies (SIIA, 2014b)
Secretariat	Minimal budget and staff; few powers of initiative	Increasing budget and staff to sufficiently help deliver goals agreed by members (Tay and Guo, 2015)

AEC = ASEAN Economic Community, ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations, SMEs = small and medium-sized enterprises.

Source: Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA), 2016.

Another area in which ASEAN must evolve and respond to its own ambitions is the realm of foreign policy, which is especially relevant in relation to its leadership in the wider region and in relation to the major powers. Given the diversity of ASEAN, it is far from likely that a ‘common foreign and security’ policy can be agreed.

However, several possibilities bear consideration. These aim for ASEAN members to give increasing recognition to the regional interest and to limit the ‘trumping’ nature of national priorities to only the most sensitive issues. We cannot wish away national interests and the suggestion is to grow that area where national and regional interests overlap and to shrink, over time, the purely national prerogatives. In tandem with this, while ASEAN Member States have different relations with the major powers, the unity of ASEAN in relation to such major powers can be enhanced. One step would be for ASEAN governments to increasingly share their views about major power influences and be transparent with each other about their bilateral relations and cooperation with major powers.

Another would be for ASEAN member governments to develop a ‘global voice’ (Tay, 2013). The group has already obtained observer status in the G20, on top of representation by Indonesia on its own, individual merit, and Singapore has consistently participated as a guest of the host country. ASEAN is projected to be the world’s fourth largest economy in 2050 (HV, Thompson and Tonby, 2014). Given projected growth rates and its AEC efforts, ASEAN is likely to be a full member of the G20 in the future and will be expected to take up global issues much more, both in that forum and in other international meetings and institutions.

In Table 2, I highlight how ASEAN has evolved since its inception in 1967 and sketch out what the grouping needs to do to achieve its goal of forming an ASEAN Community.

When we consider these and other efforts to develop the ASEAN Community in a deeper and more holistic way, we are better able to contextualise the debates about ASEAN decision-making and the role and size of the ASEAN Secretariat.

The ASEAN Way has leaned towards a secretariat that has a minimal budget and staff, and few powers of initiative (Tay and Guo, 2015). ASEAN as a group has been and still is based on consensus decision-making. In effect, these two practices mean that ASEAN is run much more by national governments than the ASEAN Secretariat or any regional body. Many more debate these practices today, with some arguing for the consensus principle to be abandoned and for large increases in budget and staff for the Secretariat.

I do not discount the challenges of reaching consensus when there is so much diversity amongst ASEAN members and especially when there is growing competition amongst major powers for influence across the region. I also believe that it will be useful and indeed necessary to develop the ASEAN Secretariat further.

But my arguments do not see these reform suggestions as ends in themselves. Rather, I would tend to put forward the goals that the member governments wish ASEAN to achieve and then push for the extent of change necessary to achieve those goals. ASEAN processes and institutions follow as a consequence, in my view.

From this point of view, the consensus method of decision-making need not be abandoned. Indeed, keeping consensus as the agreed ideal outcome has a value in trying to further enhance the exchange of views and diplomacy amongst ASEAN members. But arguments can be made for a flexible process that is closely supervised by leaders and ASEAN ministers to ensure the best chance of obtaining consensus. In that process, if, in the judgement of leaders and high-level policymakers, consensus on one or another issue is not possible, it is then a political judgement to consider other options – including the ASEAN minus X formula, which has already been included in the Charter (albeit limited to the economic sphere) (ASEAN Charter, Article 21 [2]).

Augmenting this flexible decision-making process would be a closer and more candid monitoring effort by the ASEAN Secretariat or other appointed bodies. This would be a natural outgrowth of the Charter that already envisages that the ASEAN Secretary-General is made responsible for and empowered to share his observations with the ASEAN leaders about member states' compliance with their obligations. Allied to this, the ASEAN Secretariat should be given an increased budget and staff. Not as a goal in itself or, unless so decided, to undertake their own initiatives. But rather to grow to sufficiently to help deliver that monitoring and other support that would help ASEAN meet goals agreed by the member governments.

Nature of ASEAN Leadership

Having considered external and internal demands on ASEAN, we turn to considering the nature of ASEAN leadership – both present and prospective. There are clearly dangers that ASEAN may become irrelevant and disunited, given both the external and internal factors considered. In this section, however, at the risk of seeming somewhat optimistic, I wish to be normative to sketch what can and should be done.

The ASEAN of today has done well to offer leadership to the region and to its own members but it remains quite limited. Its multilateral ministerial meetings and summits do have convening power to reach many states beyond ASEAN, including the major powers. In many ways, ASEAN has gained from the low-level trust amongst these major powers so that the group is viewed as non-threatening and perceived as an acceptable facilitator or convener to start dialogues on some of the key issues facing the region (Tay and Kiruppalini, 2015).

However, this has often meant that ASEAN must stay neutral between the major powers, especially on the most sensitive issues. A flexible and quiet diplomacy is often preferred by ASEAN and can be effective (Tay, 2016d). But there are times when that quiet diplomacy can lapse into near silence for fear that ASEAN will otherwise be divided. The calculation of national interests – political and economic – most often trumps any articulation of what is best from the regional point of view.

A project for ASEAN's future could imagine how these can be improved. The ability to help set the regional agenda would be a considerable but imaginable improvement over convening. Similarly, growing from dialogue, ASEAN could aim at building trust and starting action, where agreed. In trying to move ahead in this way, ASEAN would aim to maintain flexibility and be trusted and non-aligned amongst major powers. But ASEAN should engage with such major powers to evolve 'a chorus of concern' based on the norms and principles of the region and of international law. Moreover, where there is common cause on an identified issue, ASEAN should actively seek to involve middle powers (Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand, etc.).

Part of the limits that ASEAN faces at present relate to the rotating chair and the lack of institutional heft in the Secretariat (Tay and Guo, 2015). There are risks that in this situation the ASEAN agenda is insufficiently defined and can fluctuate quite markedly, depending on approach, resources, and interests of the chair for the year. This can be addressed by utilising a 'troika' approach to harmonise 3-year plans amongst the past, present, and future chairs. In this, it would be logical and functional that the ASEAN chair, while remaining central, can and should rely more on the Secretariat for continuity and follow up.

There are also those who feel strongly that ASEAN is too limited in its consideration of and relevance to the peoples of the region; that ASEAN is state-centric. Related to this view, ASEAN is currently focused on governments, rather than other institutions of the state (e.g. parliament and the judiciary). At present, there are some contacts and exchanges amongst the parliaments of ASEAN members, as well as between

non-governmental and people’s organisations. However, in some years there has been controversy about meetings between ASEAN leaders and these civil society representatives (Kean, 2014).

To this writer it seems epiphenomenal whether or not these meetings are held – since these are brief and highly ceremonial occasions that ‘tick the box’ of consultation. What we should focus on more is whether each ASEAN government is encouraged and indeed expected to take a whole-of-government approach so that it is not only its foreign policies and foreign policy institutions that are involved in ASEAN. It is equally and perhaps even more important that ASEAN broadens to include domestic ministries with the goal of developing dialogue and seeking to harmonise policies where possible. Additionally, on the question of developing a people’s ASEAN, it would seem a necessary foundation that in each country there be a commitment to develop and strengthen the national level involvement of people in regional issues. If this can be done, there would be more substance in becoming a ‘people’s ASEAN’ from the bottom up, even if there is no ASEAN Parliament or annual encounter between government leaders and civil society groups at the regional level.

In Table 3, I briefly sketch out the nature of ASEAN’s leadership thus far and how the grouping’s leadership needs to evolve in the future.

Table 3: The Nature of ASEAN Leadership: Present and Prospective

	ASEAN Leadership 2000s	ASEAN Leadership Future
Summitry	Convening	Agenda setting
Role(s)	Default trust and starting dialogues	Building trust and starting action
Role in Relation to Major Power Issues	Neutral, silent, or divided; flexible and quiet diplomacy	Maintaining flexibility and nonaligned but engaged to evolve ‘a chorus of concern’. Involve middle powers (India, ANZ, Korea)
Basis of Decisions	Political and economic interests in individual states	While maintaining flexibility, to become a ‘community of norms’
Role of ASEAN Chair	Insufficiently defined and can fluctuate, depending on approach, resources, and interests of the chair for the year	Utilise ‘troika’ approach to harmonise 3-year plans; and rely more on Secretariat for continuity and follow up
People in ASEAN	MFA-centric and focus on government	Specific issues that matter to people. Whole-of-government and national level involvement of people

ANZ = Australia and New Zealand; ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations; MFA = Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Source: Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA), 2016.

Conclusion: Change or Become Irrelevant

With the changing conditions and its own ambitions to be a community intra-ASEAN and a central player in the wider region, ASEAN must develop new modes and ambitions for leadership that are better able to respond to national, regional, and global needs. ASEAN is facing real and immediate challenges that will require it to adapt and change or else become increasingly irrelevant.

Ideally, the new ASEAN leadership would be (1) based on principles, rules, and previous commitments; (2) more consistent in process and scope, with support of the ASEAN Secretariat; and (3) aware of and responsive to global and Asia-Pacific issues, with more initiative and greater self-confidence with regard to how ASEAN can add value to address them.

Some commentators believe this can be done by immediately demanding stronger regional institutions. The views I have canvassed in this chapter differ by recognising the continuing primacy of the national governments. In my view, while ASEAN can and should play its part, the key actors will be at the national level. As such, it is a precondition for the above to be achieved that (1) ASEAN Member States develop a political elite that has a stronger regional perspective to balance their national and sectoral viewpoints; and (2) broader sections of the communities in the 10 ASEAN Member States start to feel the relevance of ASEAN to their lives.

Shifts in governance and policies need to be undertaken in each ASEAN country to position them to better participate and lead at the regional level. This is being driven in a number of leading ASEAN countries by national agendas for reform to become more competitive and integrated with regional production networks and global supply chains, and by systems of governance to be reformed sufficiently to enable such reforms (Tay, 2016e).

The push for national reform for these reasons – rather than an altruistic ASEAN agenda – will be the decisive factor in shaping ASEAN's emerging leadership. Much of the success of reform efforts will depend on the political will of the elites in each ASEAN country.

ASEAN can, however, assist and be assisted by programmes that foster more outward looking perspectives amongst citizens in member states and a better understanding of developments in the region. Public education efforts can also link regional developments in Southeast Asia to wider global trends such as innovation, urbanisation, transparency, and social and economic issues.

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