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Growing an ASEAN Voice? : A Common Platform in Global and Regional Governance

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Abstract: *As ASEAN moves towards Community, the group's increasing integration combines with extrinsic factors to increase the expectation and need to become play a more significant role in regional and global affairs. Yet ASEAN has had to date only a limited experience and its ethos of unity needs to be reinforced. The group faces many challenges in taking on such a regional and global role, including the very different levels of development of its member states and divergences in political and other interests. There are however precedents for ASEAN to act and speak in unison on both political-security issues as well as economics and an increasing need and will to do so.*

As the group begins to take on a central role in the region and first steps on the global stage, there remains the challenge of maintaining ASEAN unity, fostering shared perspectives and thereby forging an ASEAN platform or common voice in international forums, negotiations and institutions.

The essay explores this issue and attempts to provide recommendations toward engendering such common ASEAN positions and platforms in international arena beyond 2015. It argues that ASEAN should aim to create and reiterate norms to emerge as a normative power. However, even as a common voice and platform grows, ASEAN member states should be allowed to access their own existing channels and coalitions. An ASEAN common voice and platform should not be a monopoly or main conduit but an additional and supplementary avenue that each ASEAN member states can access. The essay concludes with some suggestions on the emerging needs and opportunities for ASEAN's common voice and policy prescriptions.

1. Introduction: Smaller States in a Multipolar and Turbulent World

The global financial crisis has had a deep and lingering impact on the developed economies and the West, whereas – while not unaffected – much of Asia has continued to outperform the world's average growth rates from 2009 and into 2013. The rise of Asia (and especially China) has driven the prediction of many that we are entering a period in which the dominance of the USA, while remaining a leading country, will give way to a more multipolar world. A symbol of this trend is of the G7 giving way to G20 as the leading mechanism to respond to the crisis.

This change in global governance combines with turbulence. In politics and security, we witness the Arab Spring, and citizen unrest in Turkey and Brazil while increasing inter-state tensions are notable across Asia and the Middle East. In economics, there are increased nationalistic and protectionist measures taken by the larger economies, as well as complex and quite uncoordinated cross-border impacts of fiscal and currency measures undertaken by the USA and other developed countries. In the environmental sphere, global negotiations for a climate change regime are stalled, even as resource concerns and disasters manifest.

There is therefore no easy conclusion that G7 will give way to a broader grouping like the G20, or that the predominance of the USA will be replaced by China taking on that role. A G-zero and a leaderless world may instead be at hand.[2] Others believe that a concert of great powers, such as a G-2 between the USA and China, can and must assert itself.

What can and should ASEAN – as a group of smaller and medium sized states – do in this turbulent and multipolar world? Can and should ASEAN speak with one voice in the wider region and global community?

A combination of intra-ASEAN, regional and global factors are pushing ASEAN in this direction. The need to respond to a turbulent world, as sketched, is one external driver. Internally, as ASEAN moves towards Community, the group's increasing integration combines with the ambition to play a more significant role in Asia-Pacific affairs.

There is, however, no strong, pre-existing ethos for the group to do so, and there are considerable diversities among the ASEAN member states so that the ambition of "common foreign policy" *ala* EU is not feasible. Witness 2012, when ASEAN unity floundered over Chinese sensitivities about the South China Sea issues, resulting in the group's quite unprecedented failure to issue a consensus agreement at the end of their annual ASEAN Ministerial Meeting.[3]

However, there are precedents for ASEAN to act and speak in unison on both political-security issues as well as economics. This can be developed further within the principles of unity, consensus and regional resilience. Indeed, this essay will argue that this would be beneficial and indeed necessary for the group.

Moreover, the ASEAN common voice and platform should moreover not simply be the lowest common denominator of the national interests of the 10 ASEAN member states. It should aim to be more, and include the creation and reiteration of norms so that ASEAN reinforces its normative power.

There are however caveats in this undertaking. While ASEAN should do more to create a common voice and platform, this must be undertaken without displacing the availability and legitimacy for individual ASEAN member states to continue to access their own existing channels and coalitions. An ASEAN common voice and platform should not in this sense seek to be a monopoly or main conduit but an additional and supplementary avenue that each ASEAN member states can access. This would accommodate the continuing diversity of views and status of ASEAN member states – especially that of Indonesia, a large country and G20 member – while fostering common positions and collective efforts to influence others in the world. Is an ASEAN common voice needed?

2. A Context for Change

ASEAN's early and continuing practices were to be only an "Association" for its member states. In this conception, the group relied and indeed strengthened practices of state sovereignty with the principle of non-intervention and the preference for a minimal secretariat with few powers of initiative and limited independence. For

many years, the common observation was that the ASEAN Secretary-General was more 'secretary' than 'General', and even today, the initiative and impetus for ASEAN is driven more by the member state governments than the Secretariat.[4]

This was re-emphasized by the group's expansion to the current 10 members. The inclusion of Vietnam, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Cambodia reinforced the recognition of diversity among members in economic development and also political outlook. While efforts are being made to close the gaps of a "two tier" ASEAN, there is a complementary effort to manage the differences. One device for this has been by allowing, for instance, different timelines for the newer members to accede to economic community commitments as well as free trade agreements.[5]

The recognition of diversity however is set within the ambition to create an ASEAN Community, [6] economic integration and connectivity and Charter. Adopted at the 13th Summit, the Charter transformed the group into a legal entity. The Charter's aims and principles included the founding norms of ASEAN such as the respect for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states and non-interference in member states' internal affairs. Newer norms were however also voiced, including working towards democracy, good governance and human rights

The external role of ASEAN in relation to the region and the world was also reinforced. Article 1.1 of the Charter states that the purpose of ASEAN is to "maintain and enhance peace, security and stability and further strengthen peace-orientated values in the region." Article 1.4 further reinforces ASEAN's commitment to the wider international community, claiming that it is ASEAN's purpose to "ensure that the peoples and Member States of ASEAN live in peace with the world at large in a just, democratic and harmonious environment."[7]

A number of leaders acknowledged this, including Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono who said (italics added): "This is a momentous development when ASEAN is consolidating, integrating and transforming itself into a community. It is achieved while *ASEAN seeks a more vigorous role in Asian and global affairs at a time when the international system is experiencing a seismic shift*."

In addition to these internal developments, there is also a centripetal effect to bring ASEAN members together from the processes of negotiating and implementing

free trade agreements (FTAs) between ASEAN and its major partners. Similarly, when ASEAN hosts Summits and ministerial meetings for the wider region – such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) – coordination and unity are key for ASEAN to playing a larger role and influencing the agenda in hosting these many countries and much larger powers.

On the economic integration front, ASEAN drives the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). In November 2012, ASEAN leaders and 6 ASEAN Dialogue Partners (namely, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and India) agreed formally to work on a regional free trade agreement. RCEP will reconcile 2 long-standing proposals – the East Asia Free Trade Agreement (EAFTA) which focused on ASEAN members, China, Japan and South Korea, and the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between ASEAN members, China, Japan, South Korea as well as Australia, New Zealand and India. With RCEP's launch, the 16-economy trade pact aims to be the largest free-trade bloc in the world. RCEP's relationship to the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) must also be navigated. TPP, which started earlier, promises deeper integration and includes some but not all ASEAN members, and is seen by some to deliberately exclude China – although it technically and legally remains open to any country willing to accede to its terms (once concluded).

In these undertakings in the economic and also political-security spheres, ASEAN must ensure that trust and neutrality are maintained. This is especially so as changes in the regional community of Asia are increasingly evident, with tensions between rising powers: not just between China and the USA, but also with India and a re-assertive Japan. Amidst this emerging competition, ASEAN as host and convenor of pan-Asian or Asia-Pacific meetings must remain relevant, trusted and neutral while asserting norms for the benefit of all. There is therefore much at stake for ASEAN to remain united and to develop a common voice on regional and global issues. Has it done so before?

3. Building A Common Platform: Rationale, Past and Current Experiences

While different circumstances and exigencies may drive cooperation and integration between sovereign states, perhaps the most common factor is that banding together enables a greater presence in the global community than any one of such states could have individually. This has been the hope of many regional and sub-regional groupings, and perhaps most clearly that of Europe.

Moving beyond economic integration, the EU has ambitiously sought to promulgate a common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) for security and defence diplomacy and actions. European experience on the CFSP is cautionary. On different occasions, the EU responses have been fragmented and not always coordinated. Take for example the EU's starkly divided response to the Libyan crisis as a case in point: Germany's abstention during the UNSC vote on enforcing a no-fly zone in Libya during the crisis in 2011 brings to bear the disunity in forging a united voice when under extreme pressure. The logic is there. But to have sovereign states speaking and acting together is difficult, can be slow, and breaks down under pressure of emergencies -- notwithstanding membership in a regional organization or the avowed acceptance of common values.

ASEAN has not attempted CSFP *ala* EU. If it did, it would almost definitely fail to reach such an ambitious target. But some of the past practices of ASEAN do give some limited examples of common platform and voice on regional issues. In politics and security, the outstanding example of an ASEAN common voice was on the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia during the Cold War years.

For many years, ASEAN members made common cause in keeping the issue alive in the international community, including at the UN. The Paris Conference on Cambodia (PICC) was convened in Paris from July-August 1989 and brought together the six ASEAN countries and the permanent five members of the UN Security Council.[8] The participants invited other states to respect the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and national unity of Cambodia. The Paris Peace Agreement was reached in 1991 and ASEAN was credited for its diplomatic

approach, which brought together the nations of Southeast Asia in their collective call for the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from the conflict.[9]

This was not always in perfect or complete unison, given the differences in national interests; e.g. between Thailand as the 'front line' state and Indonesia. It also bears mention that this was amongst the earlier ASEAN members.[10] Nevertheless, the common voice on this issue in many ways was an early vindication of the ability of the ASEAN states to unite around a cause and have considerable impact on the global stage.

Other examples of an ASEAN common voice can be seen in more limited episodes, of which three may bear mentioning: Myanmar, the South China Sea, and free trade agreements.

On Myanmar, ASEAN did not join the US or EU in sanctioning the regime in Yangon, and held to a policy of "constructive engagement", by which Myanmar was invited into ASEAN as a full member but then engaged on the premise that political interaction and economic activities of foreign investment and trade would open up and socialize the country and its leadership. Moreover, ASEAN united around criticism of the violence and force used by the generals to suppress the peaceful "saffron revolution" led by monks. At the Thirteenth ASEAN Summit on 18-22 November 2007, the Chairman encouraged Myanmar to deal with the UN directly and agreed that Myanmar's process of national reconciliation needed to move forward.[11] At the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Informal Meeting convened in New York, Singapore Foreign Minister George Yeo held candid discussions with his fellow Southeast Asian leaders. As ASEAN's Chair, Singapore issued a statement that ASEAN was "appalled to receive reports of automatic weapons being used and demanded that the Myanmar government immediately desist from the use of violence against demonstrators."[12] Following the statement, ASEAN Foreign Ministers expressed their concern to Myanmar's Foreign Minister Nyan Win that developments in Myanmar will seriously impinge upon ASEANs reputation. The ASEAN Foreign Ministers offered their full support to the decision of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon to send Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari to Myanmar.

ASEAN also was supportive of the General Elections held in the country at end 2010 when others remained skeptical of the integrity of that process (which excluded

Aung San Suu Kyi and was boycotted by her National League of Democracy). ASEAN and its Secretariat also played a significant and perhaps critical role in bridging between the Myanmar leaders and the international community in the wake of Cyclone Nargis, both in the practical administration of relief efforts and, even more importantly, in helping bridge areas of distrust.

Over the South China Sea claims, ASEAN showed unity in responding to the Chinese incursion at Mischief Reef in 1995. The Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea was signed in 2002, with all ASEAN member states and China agreeing to "exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes and affect peace and stability… refraining from action of inhabiting on the presently uninhabited islands."[13]

The common voice of ASEAN can be said to have been effective in that China responded not with further provocation or take up an armed offensive; rather Beijing stressed cooperation with ASEAN in what has been termed a "Charm offensive". The common effort of ASEAN to speak up to China then led to the successful negotiation and adoption of a Declaration of Conduct governing the disputes in the area by both ASEAN and China.

A third example of ASEAN effort to agree and utilize a common platform or voice is on economic issues, and the succession of free trade agreements that ASEAN has reached with its major partners in the region (known as ASEAN +1 FTA agreements). This is notable given that many of these economies were as large or larger than the combined economies of ASEAN, and that – given the diversity noted earlier – ASEAN interests span a very wide gamut from agricultural goods, manufactures and services.

Yet while ASEAN has some experience and strength in unifying for common cause and speaking with a common voice, each of these three examples also show instances of equivocation and failure. On Myanmar, ASEAN presently fails to speak with a common voice in reaction to human rights violations against the Muslim Rohingya in the Rakhine state. On the South China Sea territorial dispute, ASEAN ministers notoriously failed in their meeting in Cambodia in July 2012 to agree on a joint communiqué because sensitivities expressed by China triggered disagreements between the then chairman and some members. On FTAs, ASEAN was unable to

implement the China-ASEAN agreement smoothly and on time because Indonesia decided – unilaterally and late – that the agreement would negatively impact a number of its industries.

There are, moreover, many areas in which ASEAN fails or declines to even attempt to forge a common voice. This can be seen in on going negotiations at the World Trade Organization and also the UN-led processes on climate change. ASEAN members may meet at the sidelines of these international conferences, but in the actual processes of lobbying, they splinter and align to other groups and coalitions like the G-77, alliance of small states or ad hoc alliances. On the global financial system in the post-crisis world, Indonesia is the only ASEAN member included in the G20. Yet it has not sought and would not be entrusted to speak for ASEAN as a whole. Instead, efforts have been made – with considerable success -- to insert the ASEAN chairman as a regularly invited attendee and for Singapore to play a role in finance.

This is perhaps to be expected given the underlying diversity amongst ASEAN, not just historical but also current and on-going, in development and interests. Indonesia with its large domestic market is more like other G20 members in some aspects than smaller and more open economies. Or Malaysia as a Muslim nation may find common cause with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Or Cambodia and Vietnam might link to the *Francophonie* whereas Singapore and Malaysia participate in the British Commonwealth. From the perspective of each individual ASEAN member state, each has and will further develop linkages to the world, as best suits its needs, capacity and ambitions. This is the necessary multiplicity in trying to survive and thrive in a multipolar, turbulent world.

It may still however be possible bridge between this necessity and the aspiration for an ASEAN common voice. This is for ASEAN to serve as a major plank in the foreign policy of each ASEAN member with best efforts to forge a common voice on key issues while recognizing that ASEAN diplomacy cannot be the only avenue available, monopolistically. What can be done?

4. Ambitions and Limits

In looking at the region's rise in a turbulent world, there are emerging needs and ambitions for leadership. For ASEAN, there are opportunities to pay a central role in the wider regional and global issues, and within this a need to develop a common voice.

Take the economic sphere, for instance. Given a stalled WTO negotiation, there is talk of regional and inter-regional agreements, such as a trans-Atlantic agreement between the USA and Europe. Asia too must respond. On top of the existing ASEAN+1 FTAs mentioned earlier, the prospect is that a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) will be negotiated as the key pan-Asian FTA to link from India to China and south to New Zealand, with ASEAN at the center. The Asia-Pacific will also be networked between the USA and the 11 other countries participating in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). This leads to questions of how these various arrangements and geographies interact.

For ASEAN – at the center of the RCEP but with only some members (Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam) in the TPP – there are also complexities. ASEAN begins at the middle for RCEP, given the ASEAN+1 FTAs that already exist. But, diplomacy niceties aside, a substantive centrality cannot be assumed. This is due to economic weight, given that ASEAN economies even taken together are smaller than some of the individual countries in RCEP (China and Japan) are considerably larger, while others (like South Korea, Australia and India) are not insubstantial. The possibility of tensions between China and Japan is another factor. Also, ASEAN unity on economic policies and the degree of liberalization and ambition for RCEP cannot be assumed.

The concerns drawn from this example in the economic sphere are similar in politics and security – if not more accentuated. Economic agreements in general offer a trade-off within a win-win framework, whereas in the sphere of security, there is often a narrower win-lose calculation of power. The territorial disputes between Asian neighbors – like China-Japan or China-India, or in the South China Sea between China and some of the ASEAN members (Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam) show this, as do broader security and military issues.

ASEAN moreover has never set out to be a military alliance *ala* NATO, and even its current Community and Charter fall short of this – a security community is envisaged but this is within the broader frame of cooperative security, rather than a clear military alliance.

This illustrates the limits and challenges of developing an ASEAN common voice. But it should not be taken to mean that nothing can or should be done. To the contrary, given the above discussion, there is every need. An ASEAN common voice can be developed further within the principles of unity, consensus and regional resilience. For this to develop however, principles, policies and practices would need to reconsidered and adopted or adjusted. The following are a few items on a possible agenda to develop a common ASEAN voice.

First, the ASEAN position on consensus in decision making needs closer definition and more pragmatic practice. Some understand consensus as unanimity. If so, then each and every ASEAN member has in effect a Veto on decisions. This can then be used in difficult situations, even if the group is no better for it. For example, at the ASEAN Ministers meeting in Phnom Penh of 2012, (described earlier), in effect Cambodia exercised a Veto on the joint communique.

Going forward, if ASEAN is to develop its common voice, it may be better to understand consensus as lack of disagreement, differentiating between ASEAN collective interests and individual member state interests to develop a post-Cambodian understanding. There will of course be occasional mistrust among ASEAN members and certain cases where the regional interest departs from national interests. But these can be limited to extreme cases if the idea of a regional interest is articulated and given more priority.

Take for instance the Thai-Cambodian border dispute near the Preah Vihar temple. The two parties initially sought a bilateral solution to the skirmishes between border forces; in the end, there was reference of the legal issue to the International Court of Justice. But even if ASEAN did not play the initial or final role, it was not entirely absent. An Indonesian-led initiative led to an agreement to allow external parties to observe the activities by each side's border forces. While this did not finally eventuate, ASEAN common agreement was voiced of the

normative priority to find peaceful means to resolve the issue, and of the innovation of having ASEAN observers – subject to final approval by each country.

Second, the ASEAN common voice and platform should be for the regional interest. This contrasts to the idea of a common voice being based simply on the lowest common denominator of the national interests of the 10 ASEAN member states or, conversely, its aggregate. An ASEAN common voice should aim to articulate a regional interest, and include the creation and reiteration of norms so that ASEAN reinforces its normative power. Within ASEAN, this is starting to happen with the rhetorical change to set norms via the ASEAN Charter, even if these are without specific implementation mechanisms. Take for example, the adoption of norms of democracy and human rights in the Charter.

At the time of its adoption, this was viewed with skepticism if not outright cynicism. Critics pointed to the fact that Myanmar, then under a military junta, ascribed to the Charter. Today, with dramatic changes in that country, there is less reason for cynicism (caution may however be advised, to balance over optimism). The ASEAN Charter did not by itself bring about those changes – nor did ASEAN alone. In Myanmar's on going political transformation, there is a complex and still unfolding web of domestic and even personal factors at play, together with the different influences of a range of external actors other than ASEAN -- including China, the USA, and EU, as well as Japan and India.

What the ASEAN Charter – as a codified common voice of the group – can be said to have done is to signal a normative change, and to articulate the expectation of the group as a whole. The same role can be envisaged for ASEAN as it moves forward to consult with China on a Code of Conduct to help address tensions in the South China Sea.

It is not ASEAN's role to take up the cudgels for the four member states which have overlapping claims with China – they can and should do so on their own. Nor is it ASEAN's role to persuade these member states to give up their territorial claims in order to pacify ties with Beijing. ASEAN's role should instead be relatively neutral and to articulate the public good for the region. This must be done at the level of norms such as the use of peaceful means to settle the disputes, the principle of equality among states, and the international obligation to preserve the freedom and

safety of navigation. This must also be done at a working level to codify the day-to-day practices that give practical substance to such norms.

A third need is to see ASEAN common voice not as a once-and-for all unity. Flexible arrangements are instead needed for nimble politics and to cater to the diverse interests of different ASEAN members. However, developing a common voice would represent a centering back to ASEAN, so that it is the main plank in each member's foreign policy engagements and indeed a multiplier of those engagements.

What can and should emerge is for ASEAN to create a common voice and platform as needs arise in a global context without displacing the availability and legitimacy for ASEAN member states to continue to access their existing channels and coalitions. An ASEAN common voice and platform should not in this sense seek to be a monopoly or main conduit but an additional and supplementary avenue for ASEAN member states to access.

The possibility that a member might prioritize other relations need to be dealt with pragmatically. There have been doubts, for example, raised in Indonesia on whether ASEAN should remain the cornerstone of Jakarta's foreign policy strategy. The country is, after all, a G20 member in its own right, with a trillion dollar economy that (as at the time of writing) enjoying strong growth driven largely by domestic consumption and the China-led demand for resources. Indonesia has also emerged, after a post-Suharto decade, as a working democracy that is a proud advocate of the need and processes for transition in governance – in contrast to others in ASEAN.

Recognizing this, the need for an ASEAN common voice must deal with Indonesia as it is, and not deny its emerging values by insisting that ASEAN membership must bind Jakarta's hands. But neither is Indonesia to be allowed to dictate that the entire membership must now ascribe to what it believes. There should instead be a a more robust intra-ASEAN dialogue about the norms and practices of what ASEAN must stand for – a process by which changes within one or more ASEAN members must be recognized and then considered by the group as a whole.

In addition to the values of democracy and human rights in the example of Indonesia, another current and critical question for ASEAN would be about the principles of engaging China and the USA in an on-going period of cooperation and competition in the Asia-Pacific. Cambodia is one example where, without articulation and dialogue, these interests manifested and wrecked a basic of the ASEAN common voice. The shift of Myanmar to open its politics and economy and lessen (but not end) China's influence is another example. An ASEAN common voice on the current and future China-US balance in the region will be important to develop. What steps can be taken in this direction?

5. Towards A Common Voice: What is to Be Done?

If there is need and an emerging political will for ASEAN to develop a common voice, there are practical steps that can be taken. The key ones intertwine and support existing ASEAN priorities.

The first of this is the creation of ASEAN Community and especially its economic pillar with connectivity to create a more competitive ASEAN, as a common market place for consumers, and an integrated production base. Beyond the technical and infrastructure issues, this will require ASEAN member states to think more about each other and how to articulate to the outside world the prospects and attractions of investing and trading with this more integrated region.

The second is the East Asia Summit (EAS) at which ASEAN hosts the key strategic and political actors in the wider region, including the leaders of the USA and China. This aims to be a strategic discussion, and if ASEAN is to be a central player rather than simply a host focused on logistics, a common ASEAN voice on key issues must develop.

The third key ASEAN effort that relates to a common ASEAN voice will be the Charter – for which a review is in the workss.[14] It remains to be seen what focus the review will take but one key area to consider will be the processes within ASEAN for due and timely deliberation, and decision-making.

In particular, the role of the Council of Permanent Representatives – with one ambassador from each member permanently tasked to interact with the ASEAN Secretariat on ASEAN issues – needs to be reconsidered to be more effective. But changes can and should also be considered in the ASEAN Summitry, which have become encumbered with much fanfare and less time for real discussion and work. Other institutions in ASEAN that bear review would be the Coordination of ministerial councils and meetings, and of course the ASEAN Secretariat itself.

The aim for effective and efficient cooperation is not a merely administrative need. In many ways, it is to help create the possibilities of finding a common ASEAN position and voice – with less time and cost in political will. In this regard, even as meetings of ASEAN members states officials and from the Secretariat need greater efficiency and focus, there is a need at the other end of the spectrum for more open dialogue in ASEAN.

In recent years, a "retreat" format has been encouraged to further this – with less formality and fixed agendas to allow for freer and more candid discussions. The results have to date been mixed, because in some cases the form disguises the lack of substance, with discussion remaining scripted, even if the participants are seated in arm chairs and in Batik rather than in suits at a conference table. The practice of retreats needs instead to be taken further to enhance candid, closed-door dialogue and lay the base for articulating an ASEAN common voice or – conversely – to recognize where a common position is not possible.[15]

A common voice for ASEAN is not impossible even if it cannot be achieved overnight. But neither is it natural. It is not without precedent in the history of the group, although it needs to be developed further and more consciously. Efforts are needed, even as limits must be recognized and respected. Steps taken can however have many benefits to ASEAN as a group, both amongst its 10 diverse members, and in ASEAN's role in the wider region and the world.

ENDNOTES

[1] Chairman of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA), a member of the ASEAN-Institutes of Strategic and International Studies. Assistance on this article by Jonathan Tan, deputy director, and Jittawadee Chotinkul, researcher, of the SIIA is acknowledged with thanks.

[2] Ian Bremmer, *"Every Nation for Itself: Winners & Losers in a G-Zero World"* (2012)

[3] In July 2012, the 45th Annual ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) among the Foreign Ministers failed to reach a consensus on the wording of the South China Sea dispute. As a result,

ASEAN failed to issue a joint statement - the first time in 45 years of the grouping's history. Later in the year, in November 2012, disagreement again erupted when Cambodia, as ASEAN's Chair, attempted to insert in the ASEAN Summit Joint communiqué that ASEAN leaders agreed not to internationalise the South China Sea dispute. The Philippines objected and the proposed reference was dropped.

[4] As the central mechanism of ASEAN, the ASEAN Secretary General and the Secretariat could have played a greater role in building consensus and driving the agenda in the grouping. The ASEAN Charter however couched the Secretary General's role in broad terms without providing the specific mandates for the role.

[5] Since 2002, ASEAN adopted an "ASEAN minus X" approach towards negotiating free trade agreements where newer ASEAN member states were given more time and extended deadlines for tariff reduction and service sector liberalisation. With the aim to accelerate the realisation of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) to 2015, a Strategic Schedule was worked out for the newer ASEAN member states, where they are expected to achieve the AEC commitments by 2018, and to implement all undertakings by 2020.

[6] To realise the ASEAN Vision 2020, ASEAN adopted the Declaration of ASEAN Concord II (Bali Concord II) in 2003, which sought to establish an ASEAN Community by 2020. At the 12th ASEAN Summit in the Philippines in 2007, ASEAN leaders agreed to accelerate the establishment of an ASEAN Community by 2015. This underlines the grouping's efforts to reinforce ASEAN's centrality and role as the driver behind the evolving regional architecture. Some trace t*he idea of an ASEAN Community back to the ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur in 1997, which envisioned "a concert of Southeast Asian nations, outward looking, living in peace, stability and prosperity, bonded together in partnership in dynamic development and in a community of caring societies.*

[7] "The ASEAN Charter", *Association of Southeast Asian Nations* (January 2008)

[8] The six ASEAN countries at the Paris Conference on Cambodia were Brunei Darrussalam, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia. The five permanent UN members involved at the conference were China, France, Russia, UK and US.

[9] Towards the end of the Cambodian conflict and following the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement, attention shifted to how Vietnam could join ASEAN. Vietnam officially went on to join the Association three years later.

[10] Established in 1967, the founding members of ASEAN are Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore.

[11] At the 13th ASEAN Summit in 2007, Singapore, as ASEAN Chair, issued a statement urging Myanmar government to (i) open up a meaningful dialogue with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD); (ii) make full use of the good offices of the UN Secretary General and Professor Gambari who is appointed as UN Special Adviser to Myanmar, (iii) lift restrictions on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and release all political detainees.

[12] Statement by ASEAN Chair, Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo in New York, 27 September 2007

[13] "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea" *Association of Southeast Asian Nations* (November 4 2002)

[14] In the recently concluded ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in July 2013, Singapore Foreign Minister K Shanmugam said that Singapore has circulated a paper to ASEAN member states to review the ASEAN processes and institutions. The Foreign Minister suggested the need to strengthen the ASEAN secretariat to support the integration efforts in ASEAN. "Singapore Calls for Review of ASEAN Processes and Institutions", Channel News Asia, 29 July 2013.

[15] In this regard, the role of ASEAN's track-2 institutions – especially the network of think tanks in the ASEAN-Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS), bears emphasis. Begun in 1984, this network has served to further more informal dialog from national perspectives of the ASEAN members. Being non-governmental, the ASEAN ISIS has on occasion been able and willing to imagine and articulate a common voice for ASEAN as a group that is above and even in priority to the diversity of interests of the various member states.

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