

ASEAN in East Asian Integration: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract: Since the 1997 Asian financial crisis, developments in East Asian regionalism have progressed rapidly under the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) framework, which embodies the 10 ASEAN Member States and their three Northeast Asian partners of China, Japan and South Korea. Although there is much promise on ASEAN's leadership role in the APT and its growing collective assertiveness to earn centrality in the future East Asian Community (EAC), significant obstacles and challenges remain in its realization. There must be much to be done on the part of ASEAN to pursue the hub role of a regional community in the long run.

Keywords: ASEAN, East Asia Community, Interests, strategic goals.

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Introduction

In the wake of the 1997-98 East Asian crisis, the regional integration has been demonstrating the feasible signals not only to the region's economic dynamism, but also to its multilateral initiatives and the regional governments' changing mindset of domestic policy, as well as to academic debates about the feasibility of the future East Asian Community (EAC). In the process, ASEAN has been seeking measures to exert its continued influence and capacity through its norms, practices, diplomatic skills, and particularly the institution-building so as to ensure its centrality in the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) process as well as the future ASEAN-centric EAC. Against this background, ASEAN's take off as centrality in the regional arrangements also pose challenges for such a group of lesser states to take the lead over the major powers.

How ASEAN can deal with its internal limitations and external constraints so as to play its continued leadership role in the APT process and to earn centrality in the long-term development of an EAC remains an issue of growing particular concern. This paper endeavors to discuss, first, why ASEAN occupies centrality in the APT and in the EAC building. The second section examines ASEAN's limitations and challenges confronting the Association in the part of realizing its interest and strategic ambitions. Finally, the paper suggests recommendations for ASEAN in East Asian integration.

Why ASEAN at the Gravitational Center of the APT and the EAC Building?

Since the first APT informal summit in 1997, ASEAN has been widely acknowledged by East Asian countries as centrality in the APT framework and as the initiator of various initiatives that pursue the formation of the EAC. Since the first EAS held in Kuala Lumpur in December 2005, the 16-member regional grouping has maintained a general consensus that the APT process over the long term “would remain the main vehicle toward the long-term goal of building an East Asian Community, with ASEAN as the driving force.”

Why has ASEAN, which is made up of small and medium-sized economies, been able to take the lead over the three big Northeast Asian economies in the APT process and to act as the catalyst in EAC building? There are a number of factors:

First, ASEAN was the initiator of various ideas about the formation of the APT framework and has always played a pivotal role in determining the direction of this process and the EAC building. It was Malaysia's former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed who initially proposed an integrated East Asia (EAEC), followed by ASEAN leaders' efforts to hold talks with leaders of three Northeast Asian states and to bring it into Asia-Europe Meetings by the wake of the crisis. Those attempts laid a sound ground for the first APT informal summit meeting in 1997 and marked a milestone in their perception and mindsets of the Asian side in general and of East Asia in particular. In this logics, no power but ASEAN which must be the pivotal player in the APT framework because all the ideas about the process of forming the APT framework were initiated by ASEAN, while the three Northeast Asian countries, from beginning to end, were merely its representatives or partners. Since the 1997 inception of the APT, ASEAN has always played a pivotal role in the process. The APT summit meetings have been held in the ASEAN member countries only, on the margins of ASEAN Summits. Up to now, ASEAN has been navigating the APT process on the basis of the ‘ASEAN Way’, norms and self-identification. In similar fashion, since the first EAS in December 2005 in Kuala Lumpur, ASEAN has been defined as the driving force of the EAC building. Guided by a set of norms exemplified by the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), ASEAN is increasingly functioning as institutionalized platform for cooperation. This explains why some scholars critically define the nature and direction of the APT process and the EAC building as ‘ASEAN-centered mechanism’ or ‘ASEAN-sponsored regionalism.’

Second, although China and Japan, the two major powers in the region, have recently started to force friendly relations for ‘shared interest’ in regional cooperation, the burden of the existing bilateral issues, especially historical irritants and maritime disputes, and latent competition for regional leadership would make neither of them the pivotal player. Evidence is that 2005 saw a reopening of some old wounds as Sino-Japanese political relations deteriorated to their lowest point because of the two main flashpoints of friction over the revised history textbooks and the continued visits to the Yasukuni Shrine by Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi and his senior officials. In addition, there remain tenacious bilateral issues related to their sovereignty claims over the lands of Senkaku (Diaoyu) and the dispute over the demarcation of the midline in the East China Sea. Also, Sino-Japanese strategic competition for regional leadership, in spite of their apparently economic cooperation, would make neither China nor Japan humble to see its counterpart forge ahead to be at the center of the regional grouping. Evidence can be seen in Koizumi's push for the Japan-ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Partnership in 2002, following a number of bilateral FTAs between Japan and some ASEAN states after the ASEAN-China FTA (CAFTA) had been proposed. In turn, by providing the ASEAN-China FTA agreement, China has made great efforts to calm the “China threat” sentiment spreading among ASEAN, whose production structure is largely in competition with Chinese counterpart.

This is presumed that China is looking to becoming a key political and economic player ahead of Japan in redefining the regional order of East Asia. For this reason, both countries would, at least in short- or possibly medium-term, continue to support ASEAN's centrality in the APT process and the EAC building. ASEAN therefore plays a crucial role as a political broker in bridging the two countries together to cooperate for the common interest of the region. In addition, due to Sino-Japanese strategic competitiveness, the initiatives proposed by ASEAN tend to be far more easily accepted than those initiated either by China or Japan on the grounds that ASEAN does not challenge either of them. For this reason, China's and Japan's support for ASEAN's leadership role and initiative proposal is of great significance to create regional economic linkages and political cohesion in the APT process and the EAC building.

Third, ASEAN has played an important role as centrality in regional cooperation institutions, namely the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference (PMC) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). These ASEAN-centered institutions have brought on dialogue channels for the three Northeast Asian countries, as well as the outsiders to cooperate with ASEAN in development activities as well as regional and international issues of common concern. The PMC has become a complex of ministerial meetings between ASEAN on the one hand and China, Japan, South Korea, the U.S., EU, and Australia, etc., on the other. It is obvious that ASEAN as a group placed at the center of regional institutions is likely to be easily accepted primarily because there is no opposition from external powers and suspicion or hesitation among the Northeast Asian countries. Thus, that ASEAN plays a crucial role in this institution has laid firm foundation for ASEAN's leadership role in the APT process and for its centrality in the EAC building. Regarding the ARF, ASEAN has played a successful role as the initiator and the host of this forum. In similar fashion, the ARF has always been chaired by the ASEAN countries, which occupy the rotating chairmanship. Despite critics for ASEAN's conduct and effectiveness in dealing with regional security issues, the ASEAN-led ARF has so far become the only multilateral forum for security in the region, attracting the participation of all great powers such as the United States, China, Japan, Russia, India, EU and other regional countries, and creating confidence-building measures to deal with security issues of common concern.

Fourth, as mentioned early, the U.S. attitude and strategy towards East Asia is also one of the factors that help ASEAN take the lead. In fact, though the U.S. has so far been supportive of the East Asian community, it retains some reservations.¹ In other words, an economically and politically strong East Asian Community might pay ways for new rifts between the U.S. and its East Asian partners because the U.S. may worry that such strength will help increase China's influence and separate Japan and South Korea from the U.S. Furthermore, China has experienced remarkable achievements, especially in economics and expanded its influence as a major regional power, while there has been a relative decline of the U.S. influence in the region.

In this context, the U.S. has tended to support ASEAN in the APT framework and the EAC building as the counterweight to the formidably increasing power of China, and has great interest in promoting economic ties with ASEAN to play catch up to China's so-called "charm offensive."²

¹Hoang Anh Tuan. "Some political and security issues of the East Asian Community". *International Studies*, No. 16, Vietnam: Institute for International Relations, June 2005, p. 37.

² "Charm offensive" is known as the China's strategy to buy time until it is economically and militarily powerful enough to become regional hegemony.

In sum, ASEAN have created important premises for the establishment of the APT framework and catalyzed the EAC building with the APT as the main vehicle. In the light of the evolution of the APT process, ASEAN has proved its relevance and enhanced capacity that can ensure its role as the hub of the APT process and as centrality in East Asian integration process.

ASEAN's Limitations and Challenges

While ASEAN's pivotal role in these processes cannot be denied in a short or medium term, it is unimaginable of the future EAC to be led by either China or Japan because initiatives from either China or Japan are understandably sensitive to each other as an act of exerting influence, whereas the initiatives proposed by ASEAN as a group would earn enthusiasm and support from these two regional major powers, other lesser states, as well as the outsiders, particularly from the United States. In the long run, however, it is hard to ensure an ASEAN-centric EAC because of the group's internal and external constraints.

At intra-state level, the recently-occurred political crises in some ASEAN member states have been issues challenging regional politics and security. The interminable political crises in the Philippines have not come to an end. Political instability over treatment of Muslims in southern Thailand is a threat not only to Thailand itself, but also to some ASEAN Muslim countries, such as Indonesia and Malaysia. In addition, there has been a better sign of reforms and national reconciliation in Myanmar, potential upheavals may occur in midway. Democratic uprising in countries in authoritarian states has been in place. It is obvious, in an increasingly interdependent world, that political instability of one country is not only the issue of its own, but also that of the whole region. Notably, ASEAN is quite a diverse region, with sharp disparity in development level, differences in culture, religions and ethnicities. In this regard, instability of a member state because of less development could spread its influence to other members, causing conflicts, split and other regional security threats such as financial crisis, immigration, separatist movement, ethnicity and religious issues, as well as transnational crimes. Fact shows that many serious political and social problems that cannot be resolved quickly have arisen in ASEAN members. This has led the governments of these countries to focus their efforts on resolving these problems rather than on enhancing regional linkage and integration with other regional countries. This could add to the centrifugal effect and slows the integration process.

At inter-state level, there remain some unsolved issues that are threatening regional interaction and solidarity. Among these include sovereignty-related disputes between ASEAN members. It is undeniable that with ASEAN's principle of non-intervention, "ASEAN has contributed much more to conflict avoidance among its members than to conflict resolution".³ As a result, many of the conflicts between ASEAN member states that originally threatened its survival still remain unsolved. Malaysia and Singapore have been in dispute over issue of water supply and immigration for a long time, the relationships between the Philippines and Malaysia over sovereignty of Sabah, despite the concession policy on the part of the former, still remain sensitive and tenacious. The border between Thailand and Malaysia remains troublesome whether the immediate focus is on smuggling, insurgency, drug dealing or Thai Muslim disaffection. Most recently, Thailand and Cambodia have fallen into the sovereignty-related dispute over Preah Vihear temple. Notably is the South China Sea dispute, which involves a group of the ASEAN countries, including Vietnam, China, the

³ David B. H. Denoon and Evelyn Colbert. "Challenges for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)", pp. 506.

Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei, over some of the islands “with oil and natural gas reserves and occupy key shipping routes.”⁴ Moreover, there remain some issues on historical, ethnic, and religious animosities, such as dispute of Thailand and Malaysia over treatment of Muslims in southern Thailand, the long-lasting secessionist movements in Indonesia between Aceh and Papua, despite a peace process which has been under way in Aceh since 2005. These issues would place real limitations on regional cooperation and on the role of ASEAN to play in the wider geo-strategic environment.

At regional level, probably the biggest challenge for ASEAN at present is how to maintain the unity and solidarity among its member states on the basis of principles of equality, consensus and non-intervention in other`s internal affairs. Since its foundation, ASEAN leaders have attached importance to the Organization`s internal solidarity and regarded this as the key factor to the existence and development of ASEAN. It can be said that its development as an internationally-recognized organization in the region is largely because of ASEAN`s consistent effort to accomplish this goal. However, this goal has been, in fact, only relatively respected by ASEAN member states. At present, ASEAN members have two different views on this issue. Some are of the view that it is necessary to continue enhancing the unity and solidarity within the Organization by stressing respect for basic principles of ASEAN and that ASEAN members states are not allowed to interfere into internal affairs in any form and under any circumstances. Others hold the view that it is necessary to renew views on this issue. According to the latter, ASEAN has become more mature in terms of politics and is moving towards a common community. Hence, members of the community can contribute or exchange their ideas with one another frankly (the view that some countries consider “intervention”). These two different views would have crucial impacts on ASEAN intra-regional political cohesion as well as on the role and influence of ASEAN in the EAC building-process.

Second, ASEAN`s centrality can be hindered by its diversity. The Organization is the most diverse region in terms of its cultures, religions, ethnicity and political system. The fact is that ASEAN`s expansion of its members makes regional interactions more complicated and introduces a greater diversity to the politico-security predicament and outlook of the members of the grouping. In addition, there remains sharp disparity in development level and concerns on strategic politico-security issues. This can be one of the most serious issues confronting ASEAN for a reason that the solidarity and mutual trust must be the prerequisite so as to speak with one voice to exert ASEAN`s influence as the driving force in the EAC building. Notably, the ASEAN Charter reaffirms that the decision-making system is based on flexibility, consultation and consensus and that where consensus cannot be achieved, the ASEAN Summit may decide on how a specific decision can be made. This, however, could impede degree of commitment of the involved countries since state-centric interest and unsolved intra- and inter-state issues remain a barrier to regional states` integration.

At international level, the biggest challenge for ASEAN is how to navigate its relations with the major and great powers, of which China is the most complex actor. It is noteworthy that there is a close linkage between the security of ASEAN and that of the Asia Pacific region. As a result of its geography and historical background, any single gesture or decision made by ASEAN in its relations with the U.S. or other great powers is understandably very

⁴ The Singapore Institution of International Affair, “*Regional Integration, Trade and Conflict in Southeast Asia*”, published by the International Institute for Substantial Development (IISD), issued in January 2007, p.6.

sensitive to China. By contrast, any further improvement in ASEAN's relations with China is also understandably very sensitive to other great powers, particularly the U.S. and Japan. Both ASEAN and APEC still lack region-wide comprehensive cooperation and effective security mechanisms to regulate potential rivalries while great powers have a desire to increase its influence over the region. With regard to geo-politics, in accordance with the U.S. and Japanese interests and strategic goals in East Asian regionalism, ASEAN is being and will probably be supported by the these two powers both economically and politically as a strategy to counterbalance the rise of China. In similar fashion, China is pursuing "good-neighbor relationships" with ASEAN to ensure a stable and peaceful peripheral environment, on the one hand, to serve its cause of reform and modernization, attracting outward sources for its continued economic development, and on the other, to expand its growing regional influence and undermine the influence of Japan and the United States. In this respect, the U.S. and Japan's support for ASEAN has caused unpredictable patterns of China's behavior towards the region. Evidence is that in November 2007 Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jia bao made a proposal for stronger China –ASEAN military ties and that although a Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea was signed between ASEAN and China in 2002, China have continuously exerted its military expansion and natural resources exploitation on the sovereignty of the Paracel and Spratly Islands. In this regard, "China's behavior in the South China Sea has become more confrontational than co-operative and deserves renewed ASEAN attention."⁵ Notably, in December 2008 China established a new administrative organ--Shansha--to oversee the Paracel and Spratly archipelagoes. While politico-security concerns about China cannot be denied, its increasing power in economics, particularly in trade and investment, has various prominent advantages, as compared to ASEAN. Under this consideration, whether or not China has a latent intention of dominating a future EAC remains a challenge revolving around ASEAN in the EAC building process.

The second challenge to ASEAN's centrality is Sino-Japanese rivalry and their competitive regional leadership between China and Japan. Sino-Japanese relations underwent historical animosities, mutual suspicion and occasional hostilities. It is, however, worth noting that Japan would tend to cooperate with the U.S. based on more independent foreign policy and on equal footing, and to enhance closer ties with East Asian countries. However, one cannot discard the fact that China and Japan are engaged in both cooperation and competition, particularly for regional leadership. China has attempted to expand its growing regional influence in Southeast Asia. It has not only engaged ASEAN to compete with other major and great powers, but also put ASEAN in dilemma: (i) either to cooperate with the United States and Japan to coordinate policy so as to contain the rise of China; or (ii) to carry out active "engagement" policy with China. If ASEAN follows the first choice, it could lead its relations to the state of confrontation and tension with China. ASEAN does not, in fact, pursue this strategy even when it is backed by the United States, Japan and the EU, for a reason that China is getting increasingly powerful. Following this choice also means that ASEAN will miss opportunities to link more closely with the Chinese economy – an economy, which is widely believed to be the world's biggest in 2030 and that it is impossible for ASEAN to convince China to cooperate for regional interests. Instead, ASEAN has pursued a strategy of balance of power among the great powers. However, long way is still ahead with numerous unpredictability, uncertainties and complexities. Whether China and Japan will come closer together to play constructive, non-threatening, and mutual reinforcing

⁵ Mark J. Valencia. "The South China Sea: The Phoenix Rises from Its Ashes?", p. 1. [http://guderian.sg1004.myweb.hinet.net/CFPS/FP_No2.pdf] – accessed on 23 February 2010.

roles that focus on common regional aspirations largely depends on ASEAN's careful navigation of their relations. Although it is envisioned that ASEAN would not lose its role as the driving force in a future EAC, with the APT process as the main vehicle, an EAC also means that all players in this community are independent members. Therefore, China and Japan could have great opportunities to play a greater role. If ASEAN is not successful in navigating sensitive relations between China and Japan and drive them towards a constructive, non-threatening, and mutual reinforcing roles, there will be no future for East Asian long-term cooperation, and then ASEAN's role will be eroded. Moreover, if this happens, it is unavoidable of the risk of a two-tier ASEAN, one is pro-China and another is pro-Japan.

Another striking challenge is the U.S.-China relations that could be an impediment for ASEAN to catalyze the EAC building process. Although the United States is no longer opposing the East Asian initiative, the most serious political obstacle to East Asian long-term cooperation is the power-play game between the U.S. and China. With its "Pivot to Asia" policy, the United States will seek measures for enhanced engagement in regional countries so as to secure its national interest in the region and contain a rising China. The fact is that many of the East Asian countries, which have been the U.S. allies, such as Japan and South Korea in North and the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore in Southeast Asia, prioritize their relations with the U.S. ahead of their ties with any other country in the region. However, this would possibly add more barriers to Sino-US relations as well as ASEAN-China ties in fostering regional cooperation. Evidence is that Sino-US ties and ASEAN-China relations have somehow deteriorated when ASEAN demonstrated its endorsement for the inclusion of the United States, along with Russia, to the expanded EAS and when China showed its insistence on a one-on-one basis resolution to the SCS, while ASEAN and the United States insisted on a multilateral approach to the SCS dispute at 17th ARF in Hanoi in April 2010. Under this rationale, in the event that China's influence is exerted in the whole region and that the U.S. influence and power are relatively declined, the U.S. may put pressure on its allies not to forge closer relations in the APT process or in the EAC building process to contain the increasing power of China. By contrast, if China is left behind the United States when other regional countries engage the latter to contain China, there would be few successes for the realization of the future EAC since China always remain a crucial player in the EAC building. If either of these scenarios happens, ASEAN cannot earn its reputation by convincing regional countries to promote the pace of East Asian integration. ASEAN's leadership role would therefore be eroded. For this reason, ASEAN's centrality in the EAC building is always an issue of particular concern to navigate geo-political and power contests between the major and great powers.

In economics, disparity in levels of development within the Association is still a big challenge for ASEAN in regional economic integration. At present, there is disparity of approximately 50-folds in terms of GDP per capita between Singapore and the CLMV (see *Figure3*). The disparity between ASEAN-6 and ASEAN-4 is also getting bigger. Sharp disparity in wealth and poverty can be seen not only among the members, but also in each individual member itself. In fact, concerned about a two-tier ASEAN, the ASEAN Integrated Scheme of Preference (AISP), approved by ASEAN leaders in Bangkok in 2001, seeks to facilitate entry of CLMV products to ASEAN-6. However, effectiveness of this program remains low. Towards an ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) that ASEAN leaders agreed to establish by 2015, five years earlier than the timeline agreed at the 9th ASEAN Summit in Bali in October 2003, the ASEAN Economic Ministers' High Level Task Force (HLTF) on Economic Integration has made lots of recommendations, among which includes the

establishment of (i) “a legal unit within the ASEAN Secretariat to provide legal advice on trade Disputes; (ii) the ASEAN Consultation to Solve Trade and Investment Issues in order to provide quick resolution to operations problems (this would be similar to the EU mechanism); and (iii) the ASEAN Compliance Body”.⁶ This could be an active step towards further promotion of regional economic linkage, thus contributing to narrowing down the development gap between ASEAN member states in intra-regional economic linkage and in East Asian integration. However, the fact is that trade liberalization and facilitation of late-entry countries of the CLMV are under implementation at a sluggish pace. This could partly cause difficulties for ASEAN-4 to further engage in ASEAN-6 so as to strengthen intra-regional economic linkage and would increase disparity in FDI inflows from the economies outside the region.

In terms of external constraints, first, the rise of China in trade and investments, particularly after its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), would imply potential challenges to ASEAN’s economies. Since the 1978 “open-door” policy, China has been a great competitor with ASEAN in the export markets and investment inflows from the developed economies. As generally believed to be the world’s manufacturing factory, China is rising as “a hub of trade, investment and production in East Asia as it is attracting roughly one half of intraregional trade, 60 percent of investments and the bulk of labor-intensive production of manufactures.”⁷ China’s integration in WTO has also further strengthened its comparative advantage as compared to that of ASEAN’s economies. Reasons lie in the fact that China is a far bigger market than ASEAN (1.3 billion people in comparison with approximately 600 million of ASEAN). Besides, China has rapidly integrated in the global trading regime with its united legal environment, while ASEAN is an organization embodying 10 nations with lacking complementarities and sharp disparity in levels of development. The world’s most populous country is also a more dynamic economy and has higher competitiveness since the costs of labor and production are substantially low. Moreover, its political environment is relatively stable, compared to ASEAN member states. For these reasons, China is attracting most of FDI from other Asian and Western countries. By the end of 2006, total accumulated projects, contractual value and realized value of FDI in China had reached 594,445; 1497.9 billion USD and 703.9 billion USD, respectively. In recent years, China has put much of its investment in strengthening its internal economy to further attract both domestic and foreign investors: “Over half of China’s imports are manufacturing-intensive products like electronics, machinery, equipment and instruments.”⁸ Furthermore, China offers other incentives to foreign investors, such as low import duties and tax breaks, and low-cost land. It is also achieving managerial expertise, technologies, and access to the global network of the investing company. Indeed, China has become the global production platform. Under this consideration, FDI sources going to China will be a challenge for ASEAN since low inflows of FDI to the Association will cause difficulties in promoting economic growth. Notably, the product structure of ASEAN is generally similar to that of China, while ASEAN does not have the same strong potential of becoming a center for knowledge and of technology development to compete with China. Accordingly, in regional economic integration, it is highly vital for ASEAN to push regional economic linkage forward and to make its business environment more attractive in the eye of foreign investors.

⁶ Denis Hew. “Economic Integration in East Asia: An ASEAN Perspective”. *UNISCI Discussion Paper* No.11 (Mayo/December 2009), pp.51.

⁷Byung-JoonAhn.“The Rise of China and the Future of East Asian Integration”.*Asian Pacific Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2004, Institute for International Policy Studies, pp. 20.

⁸ Ibid., p. 21.

Another striking challenge that ASEAN is facing is how to promote the East Asian regional linkage on the one hand, and how to maintain open economic linkage with the global economy, on the other. In the APT and in the EAC building processes, ASEAN is defined as the driving force to enhance economic integration in East Asia. The evolution of East Asian regionalism has in fact brought on increasing intra-East Asian trade over the past decade. However, apart from such big regional centers of the global economy as Japan and China, the United States and the European Union (EU) have always been regarded as the highly significant trading partners with ASEAN. ASEAN's economic development in the past decades is a direct result of their effective implementation of trade liberalization and facilitation and the maintenance of open economies. Thanks to the "outward" economic policy, ASEAN has been able to take advantage of the global big economies, particularly of the United States, the EU and Japan, in investments, technological transfer and the export markets. The economic centers of the United States and the EU remain crucial trading partner and investor to strengthen ASEAN's economic development at least in short or even in medium period. The Association's enhanced economic linkage, though fast or strengthened, will not replace the three centers, as can be seen in external investment in Southeast Asia over the past decade. Thus, it is envisioned that ASEAN's economic linkage and East Asian regional economic integration will not possibly exclude the role of the U.S. and the EU economies vested in ASEAN members. Under this rationale, how the Association can move the East Asian regional economic integration forwards as the driving force and simultaneously make best use of external trade and investment from the United States and the EU for stability and prosperity in Southeast Asia still remains a challenge for ASEAN in regional and global economic integration.

Recommendations

Through the analysis of ASEAN's internal limitations and external constraints, there is a danger that ASEAN's influence could be eclipsed in the future EAC. In other words, whether ASEAN will continue to enjoy the political support from the "Plus Three" countries and the outsiders in the EAC building to play centrality in the EAC building and in the future largely depends on its capacity to deal with its internal and external limitations. Under this consideration, some recommendations are necessarily made to help ASEAN member states with equitable policies for the continued maintenance of its voice and proactive role in the APT process and in the EAC building.

Dealing with ASEAN's Internal Limitations

Firstly, ASEAN should realize that building its inner strength and capacity is the immediate objective, while building an East Asia community is a long-term objective. Facts show that when the economies of France and Germany are weakened, their leadership role also declines. Similarly, ASEAN must be strong if its leading role in East Asia cooperation is to be maintained. To begin with, the ASEAN should focus on the implementation of its objectives to realize an ASEAN Community by 2015, which consists of three main pillars, namely ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), ASEAN Security Community (ASC) and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). In addition, the cooperative structure within ASEAN will help its members address the need for political security, which cannot be met solely by an EAC. This is quite a comprehensive, but also ambitious plan of ASEAN. If successful, the ASEAN Community will create a new cohesion, helping ASEAN strengthen its position with the regional major countries and the outsiders in East Asian integration. To realize this plan, each individual member needs to focus on cooperation initiatives and strategic framework for the common interests of ASEAN as a community. At present many member states seem to propose infeasible ideas and initiatives, especially when they host the

ASEAN Summit, rather than to consider whether or not the initiatives can make real contributions to promoting regional cooperation and strengthening ASEAN's position. Thus, to build a long-term communal house, today each member must not only raise awareness and responsibility for the common interests of the ASEAN community through more realistic and feasible initiatives, but also show highly determined political will to push intra-regional political cohesion and economic linkage forward.

Second, in order to maintain its leading role in East Asia integration, ASEAN must strengthen the solidarity and mutual trust among member countries. The fact is that ASEAN member states still lack comprehensive mutual understanding and trust. The lessons learnt from the three big countries of Europe, France, Germany and Great Britain, show that if the leadership role in the region is to be maintained, it is necessary to put aside historical irritants and rapidly settle any remaining contradictions by means of consensus, and focus on cooperation and mutual interdependence. "While suspicions were far from over, at critical points of time, the three major European powers were able to compromise and move on with the integration process".⁹ The ASEAN countries must be able to create a similar unity and solidarity and temporarily set aside any differences and strengthen cooperation for their voices to be heard. In fact, one of the principles clearly defined in the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) is "*peaceful settlement of dispute*" and one of the "unwritten" principles of the ASEAN Way is "*shelving disagreement for latter settlement*". These principles have contributed remarkably to the development of ASEAN over the last four decades. Indonesia's Prime Minister Suharto ever acted as the mediator to Malaysia and the Philippines to deal with their claims over the sovereignty of Sabah island. Against this background, historical irritants seem sensitive and some inter-state issues remain unsolved. This could negatively affect the solidarity and impede decision-making as well as the implementation of decisions of the Association. The unsolved issues in Singapore-Malaysia or Thailand-Cambodia relations are partly a manifestation of mutual distrust, which causes both sides not either to reconcile through direct negotiations or to invite a third party as the mediator to reconcile their bilateral disputes. ASEAN member states have generally abided by the ASEAN norms to accede to the TAC¹⁰, in which the norms are enshrined. Yet, they have submitted bilateral territorial disputes to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, while "the High Council provided for in the TAC, a minister-level body intended to help find peaceful ways of settling disputes, has never been used."¹¹ For these reasons, the maintenance of solidarity and mutual trust, as well as a quick move towards dispute resolution must be, above all, the prerequisite to enhance ASEAN's collective strength and position in East Asian integration.

Third, political cohesion and economic integration must be undertaken in an interrelated way. ASEAN is a diverse region, where intra-state politico-security instability and inter-state sovereignty-related disputes remain touchy and tenacious. For this reason, political cohesion required for the exercise of collective leadership is an essential prerequisite for regional

⁹ Mark Beeson. "Rethinking Regionalism: Europe and East Asia in Comparative Historical Perspective". *Working paper*, Canberra: Oceanic Conference on International Studies, July 14-16, 2004.

¹⁰ TAC Article 13 states that parties shall act in good faith to prevent disputes from arising between them. Parties are obliged to "refrain from the threat or use of force," and are instead called upon to settle disputes "through friendly negotiations." Article 15 states that in cases where disputes cannot be settled via direct negotiation between TAC parties, the High Council shall take cognizance of the matter and recommend an appropriate means of settlement, such as good offices, mediation, inquiry, or conciliation.

¹¹ Rodolfo C. Severino. "ASEAN Beyond Forty: Towards Political and Economic Integration". *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2007), ISEAS, pp. 410-411.

economic integration. In other words, without a high degree of political cohesion, real economic integration is impossible. In return, regional economic integration is a necessary condition to enhance political cohesion and to strengthen the competitiveness of the region. The lesson of the EU integration has shown that, political cohesion ought to be built on economic foundations, which gives countries an economic stake in regionalism. ASEAN members have in fact concluded a lot of declarations, framework agreements and action plans. However, the economic integration of the Association has been ineffectively implemented and at a sluggish pace. Reasons lie in the fact that ASEAN member states still remain cautious in regional integration and the lack of comprehensive mutual understanding and trust would hinder regional economic linkage and integration. Also, there remains a general lack of commitment to the region. For this reason, all ASEAN member states need to achieve high political determination, and to clearly recognize and vigorously act on the intimate linkage between political cohesion and economic integration for the common interests of the region as well as its member states' well-beings and stability. In this sense, each ASEAN member also needs to bring on its own politico-economic stability, implement reformed policy and institutions equitable with the characteristics of its own and of the region. Simultaneously, ASEAN leaders need to bring the political and economic aspects of regionalism together in a coherent whole through regional cooperation forums, particularly the annual ASEAN Summits.

Fourth, although the ASEAN Charter primarily represents a legally binding document, it serves as a supplementation of the "ASEAN Way", which still stresses the consensus-based decision-making and the principle of non-intervention as the purposes and objectives of ASEAN's regionalization. It cannot be discarded that the ASEAN principles of consensus-based decision-making and non-intervention, in spite of slow and time consuming, have greatly contributed to harmonizing diverging interests of the member states and to making Southeast Asia "a region of peace" for more than forty years of its existence and development. However, East Asia is a wider region with diversity in geographical size, national interests and population than in Southeast Asia. ASEAN therefore ought to ensure its member states' commitment to the implementation of decisions through legally binding agreements. In addition, ASEAN should modify the so-called principle of non-intervention. That is, there is a need for enhanced interactions in which all member states could give direct assistance and consultation to strengthening institution-building, increasing support for legal and administrative reforms, and to the strengthening of the rule of law. Under this consideration, this is not, to a large extent, the violation of "non-intervention" principle because "the member states' government cannot seek to expand influence by a direct appeal to citizens of another country, by occupation, or by using home territory as a base for opposing another regime"¹², as the term "non-intervention" is traditionally defined, but regional countries could play a more active and constructive role for the common interests of the region.

Dealing with ASEAN's External Constraints

First, ASEAN needs exert its influence by taking common positions on issues that have vital impacts on the region. Many scholars are of the view that as the only organization in East Asia, ASEAN's positions in dealing with vital issues arising in the region is significant not only to ASEAN, but also to East Asia's stability, for a reason that working out common positions would not only create opportunities for ASEAN to deal collectively with regional

¹² John Funston. "ASEAN and the Principle of Non-Intervention – Practice and Prospects". Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), No.5, March, 2000, p. 2.

crises that might confront it in the future, but also promote the East Asian regional political cohesion and solidarity. In addition, “it would enable ASEAN to exert greater influence on regional affairs, and reinforce its image as an Association that has substantial political relevance”.¹³ This is also significant for its own sake since this enables ASEAN, on the one hand, to engage with East Asian countries and the outsiders to deal with issues of common concerns and on the other, to strengthen the Association’s capacity and legitimacy to exert its intellectual leadership through convening the region-wide political and security forums, like the ARF, in the Asia Pacific. Currently, there are a number of politico-security issues that confront ASEAN in particular and East Asia in general in the future. The spotlight of some issues includes the Taiwan Straits issue, the territorial disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), the threats of terrorism, and so on. The first issue remains potential tension and uncertainty not only in China-Taiwan relations, but also in the U.S.-China ties, a source of potential conflict “that could be provoked by Taiwanese policies or actions that Beijing would interpret as moves towards *de jure* independence or a separate national identity”,¹⁴ in spite of the collapse of Chen Shui-bian and China-Taiwan’s recent moves towards closer economic nexus under the newly-elected President Ma Ying-jeou. For this reason, ASEAN should devise a common strategy to respond to any such action or policy that could negatively affect regional peace and stability. The second issue is also potentially confronting ASEAN’s stability and solidarity. Although China and ASEAN, as mentioned previously, have concluded the 2002 Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the SCS, the on-and-off-again tension between China and the four claimants, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei, remains rather sensitive. Thus, ASEAN needs to take common positions so as to raise its collective voice and to maintain internal solidarity to tie China to its commitments towards the Declaration and act upon the common interests of the involved countries.

In addition to the basic issue of legal jurisdiction, ASEAN needs to strengthen member states’ consciousness of avoiding separate individual deals with China. Simultaneously, the Association needs to adopt a common position on some other specific issues related to the South China Sea, such as the management of conflicting fishing rights, the application of freedom of navigation and over-flight, the exploitation of potential resources, as well as environmental issues. These are really unsolved issues, potentially vulnerable to the interests of the ASEAN member states, while the Association has not made any great attempts to arrive at a common ASEAN position to effectively deal with them. Apart from the two above issues, the threats of terrorism would necessarily call for common ASEAN positions. Although the governments of ASEAN member states have cracked down many terrorist, and radical and extremist religious groups, particularly in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, terrorism remains a big threat to some of ASEAN countries. For this reason, ASEAN needs to devise a common strategy and convene the region-wide forums to deal with the threats of terrorism and non-traditional crimes. Through the ARF, ASEAN needs to be more dynamic and highly determined to cooperate more closely with the regional countries in intelligence, policing, financial control, immigration, and sometimes among the military when it is needed. At the same time, ASEAN needs make best use of the external supports, particularly from the United States in its anti-terrorist efforts, to raise the threshold against any attack in the future, considering terrorism not only to be a challenge to Southeast Asia, but also to the region-wide concerns. This would partly show ASEAN’s responsibility and capacity as the driving force in regional integration.

¹³Rodolfo C. Severino. “ASEAN Beyond Forty: Towards Political and Economic Integration”. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2007), ISEAS, p. 417.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Second, ASEAN ought to ensure a constructive cooperation between China and Japan for the common interests of East Asian integration. The EU experience has shown that “cooperation between France and Germany has been a prerequisite for the EU integration”.¹⁵ While in East Asia, the uncertain power relationship between China and Japan may lead to a possibility that both regional major powers could tend to act unilaterally and pursue global geo-political and geo-strategic interests, which at times collide with regional interests. Therefore, they might use the EAC building process under the APT as venues to deal or compromise with global powers like the U.S. and the EU at the expense of smaller countries in the region. If this is about to happen, ASEAN might do little to influence their behaviors. For this reason, ASEAN ought to make sure that East Asia cooperation requires a constructive cooperation between China and Japan, and erode their intention of the competitive regional leadership. Without this cooperation, there is little future for the East Asia cooperation since “Open division and competition for influence between these two countries would force other countries in the region to take sides either pro-China or pro-Japan, and this situation would negatively affect the East Asia cooperation and ASEAN solidarity”.¹⁶ Simultaneously, ASEAN must carefully navigate Sino-Japanese bilateral relations so as to make best use of their continued support for ASEAN leadership role in the APT process as well as in the EAC building.

Third, ASEAN must maintain a balanced relationship between the regional major powers and the potential impacts of the United States in the region. The lesson learned from France, Germany and Great Britain in the EU show that a certain balance must be maintained in order to prevent one country from controlling the other. In East Asia, “China and Japan are engaged in a silent competition to win over ASEAN”,¹⁷ and the United States is pursuing its influence as well as its geo-economic and geo-strategic interests to counterbalance the increasing power of China. Thus, while ASEAN is in a favorable position in the China-ASEAN-Japan strategic triangle, it must continue to maintain a balanced relationship with these two countries and secure assistance from both of them. In a similar way, ASEAN ought to make best use of the U.S. presence in Southeast Asia to deal with the existing issues arising from ASEAN-China relations, particularly the SCS issue.

Fourth, ASEAN ought to emphasize capacity-building at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The fact is that the ARF, driven by ASEAN, is the only intergovernmental forum for security issues in the Asia Pacific region and has been playing the role of a “glue” to bring all major powers in Northeast Asia and non-East Asian countries together so as to discuss security issues and create conditions for deepening regional integration. However, there remain a number of shortfalls. Since its establishment in 1994, the ARF has not played any significant role in managing or resolving traditional conflicts. In recent years, it has explored non-traditional issues more extensively, but has not yet adopted binding substantive region-wide measure. In addition, the ARF’s response to unfolding situation remains slow. Reasons lie to a large extent in the fact that ASEAN does not enjoy certain advantages because it comprises several small countries with modest economic strength and weak political will and

¹⁵ Mark Beeson. “Rethinking Regionalism: Europe and East Asia in Comparative Historical Perspective”. *Working paper*, Canberra: Oceanic Conference on International Studies, July 14-16, 2004.

¹⁶ DinhThiHienLuong. “The Rise of East Asian regionalism and the Roles of China and Japan”. *International Studies*, Vietnam: Journal of International Studies of Institute for International Relations, No 17, December 2005, pp.59-70.

¹⁷ DinhThiHienLuong, *The Rise of East Asian regionalism and the Roles of China and Japan*, *International Studies*, Vietnam: Journal of International Studies of Institute for International Relations (Vietnam), No 17, December 2005, pp.59-70.

that China is wary that “the ARF process will be used by the U.S and like-minded states to contain her and intervene in disputes that involve her fundamental interests, such as the cross-straits issue and Tibet.”¹⁸ For this reason, ASEAN ought to foster institution and capacity-building to strengthen work in the “non-traditional” security issues and maintain balance between institution building and issues-orientation.

The entire process requires ASEAN to formulate its own course and to take due account of the characteristics of the Association and of the region by enhancing mutual trust, making gradual progress and moving at a pace comfortable to all on the basis of the use of consultative process and the emphasis on the importance of inclusiveness in the process of security dialogue and cooperation. It is noteworthy that the proposal for a co-chair system involving a non-ASEAN co-chair has been discussed in the forums held by the ARF. However, ASEAN ought to consider that co-chairing may make ASEAN itself lose its leadership and become divided. Moreover, it is even more difficult to reach consensus, with two chairs. For these reasons, to ensure that the ARF would continue to be driven by ASEAN, the Association ought to strengthen its capacity-building and proceed with gradual institutionalization to maintain its role as the driving force. The fact that the ARF have already agreed upon the establishment of an ARF Unit in the ASEAN Secretariat would probably enable ASEAN to enhance the ARF’s capacity at its drive.

In terms of economics, first, the ASEAN member states ought to boost intra-ASEAN investment and make it an attractive destination for FDI inflows into the region. It cannot be discounted that there remains the lack of complementarities among the ASEAN economies. This makes the ASEAN nations, to a large extent, fierce competitors that preferential treatment of each other becomes a less attractive option than enticing new foreign investments into the region.¹⁹ Thus, ASEAN member states ought to contribute to fostering intra-ASEAN investment, considering closer economic linkage within the Association to be long-term interests of the ASEAN Community. To make ASEAN’s economic linkage more effective and stable, the more developed members, ASEAN 6, need to assist the less-developed economies by further enhancing their investment in the CLMV and by promoting closer economic ties, policy consultation and coordination. On the other hand, it requires the CLMV to implement wide and deep reforms, maintain political stability, and foster institution-building compatible with integration policy of the regional grouping to create favorable environment for business of intra-regional investors.

In addition, ASEAN ought to further boost the regional projects to enhance information sharing and consultation on trade and investments within the region. This would contribute to confidence-building measures and bridging political vacancy, on the one hand, and to fostering regional cooperation and coordination, as well as narrowing down the development gap between the member states, on the other. In fact, the ASEAN Comprehensive Investment Agreement (ACIA) has been concluded. This would not only further facilitate the integration of ASEAN companies into the regional and global economy through production and services networks, but it would also extend the benefits derived from the agreement to ASEAN-based foreign investors. Notably, AFTA and an the establishment of an ASEAN Economic

¹⁸ Mohamed Jawhar Hassan. “Strengthening Cooperation in the ASEAN Regional Forum: An ASEAN View”. In Saw Swee-Hock, Sheng Lijun and Chin Kin Wah, eds. *ASEAN-China Relations: Realities and Prospects*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) Publication, 2005, p. 34.

¹⁹Jenina Joy Chavez. “Regionalism beyond an Elite Project: Challenge of Building Responsive Sub-regional Economic Communities”. In Melissa G. Curley and Nicholas Thomas, eds. *Advancing East Asian Regionalism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 164.

Community (AEC) would be of great significance not only to ASEAN's competitiveness capacity in regional economic integration, but also to the strengthening of FDI attractiveness from the outside investors in the region.

Second, ASEAN must make it a highly competitive economic region, particularly in the face of the rise of China in economics. In fact, ASEAN's competitiveness has been not high. It is increasingly difficult for ASEAN to compete with China in FDI inflows and in trading inputs and outputs primarily because of the generally similar product structure between China and ASEAN, while the former enjoys intensive-labor industry, low wages, and is a center for knowledge and of technology development. This suggests that China would surpass ASEAN in competitiveness in the long run. For this reason, ASEAN ought to seek measures to establish a new regional division of labor based on the principles of the supply chain. This would be the best way to form a movement toward economic integration and to improve the competitiveness of ASEAN products regionally and internationally. It is envisioned that it would be difficult for ASEAN, particularly the four late-entry countries of CLMV, whose dismantlement of backward internal economic relationships are under way, to enter the regional system for the division of labor as promising and equal members. Thus, a supply chain-based new regional division would foster the Association's bargaining power relative to partners outside the region. In addition, ASEAN must strengthen work of information exchange, experience and cooperation on competition policy, and further enhance the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the region.

To achieve this goal, ASEAN must buy time in the long run. With respect to the establishment of the future East Asia Free Trade Area (EAFTA), the ASEAN should learn from the experiences of the EU, which shows that integration proceeds gradually, at different pace for different countries. With a hasty process of integration, the less developed ASEAN members would suffer heavy losses at the hands of developed countries in Northeast Asia. Therefore, the ASEAN should be more cautious and refrain from lifting at a too early stage its tariff and non-tariff barriers on goods and services from the Northeast Asian countries. The solution for ASEAN is to continue its dynamic growth, to selectively participate in the East Asia cooperation, and join EAFTA only when there is no longer a big economic gap between the ASEAN and Northeast Asian countries. In 2009 ASEAN has established an Expert Group on Competition (EGC) to work on developing Regional Guidelines on Competition Policy, developing Handbook on Competition Policies and Laws in ASEAN for Business and prioritizing capacity building activities. ASEAN is also exploring the development of an ASEAN SMEs Service Desk and of on-line linkages among SMEs Service Centers of the member states and the wider dissemination and sharing of information on regional and international SMEs trade fairs, and on business matching and procurement activities in each member state.²⁰This is a crucial and logical step towards the goal of attracting FDI inflows, fostering regional economic linkage and integration and strengthening competitiveness of the member states' economies in East Asian economic integration.

At the same time, both ASEAN and China need to place emphasis on fostering economic partnership by keeping within the timelines for the realization of the CAFTA and being flexible and accommodating in the negotiations towards the FTA because of the different levels of economic development. Both sides also need to further provide consultation and information exchange, as well as technological mutual assistance. On the part of ASEAN, it

²⁰Dr. SurinPitsuwan, Secretary-General of ASEAN. "Building an ASEAN Economic Community in the Heart of East Asia". A speech delivered at the ASEAN Summit (March 2010), p. 4.

should seek creative ways to make China do more in terms of investments into ASEAN, particularly in the manufacturing sector as well as the services sector because the services industry in ASEAN is generally more mature. In particular, ASEAN should seek measures to increase the collaboration on the part of China to enhance its member states' integration, such as in the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) and to help its member states narrow down the gaps in national development, such as the Great Mekong River Development Project. Although the CAFTA is only one step towards that end, cooperation of the whole East Asia will be enhanced through the development of the CAFTA and two other ASEAN+1 cooperation mechanisms. This means the CAFTA has fostered and will continue to further strengthen Japan and ROK to implement similar closer economic partnership with ASEAN. Thus, the ten-member group would reap the benefits from the regional major economies' proactive moves towards the progress in negotiating and establishing the FTA with ASEAN.

With respect to ASEAN-U.S. relations, although the acceleration of the FTAs between ASEAN and the three Northeast Asian countries also means ASEAN's less dependence on the big economies outside the region, ASEAN should continue to consider the United States to be a crucial trading partner and investor. It is generally believed that East Asia is getting increasingly integrated and the United States is no longer the most important trading partner and investor in the region, especially since the 1997 establishment of the APT. However, the U.S. will never withdraw its geo-economic and geo-strategic interests in the region and to contain China's growing regional influence and power under the Obama administration's renewed foreign policy. Added to this, regional countries endorse an open and inclusive approach East Asian regionalism, as the East Asia Summit clearly defines.

For this reason, the EAC building cannot exclude US role and in fact, the United States has demonstrated its growing interest in the expanded EAS. With regard to geo-politics, although Japan sees ASEAN at core of East Asian community, it still stresses the U.S. ties, making clear that "the Japan-U.S. alliance remains the cornerstone of Tokyo's foreign policy".²¹ For its part, China has not and will not, of course, confront the United States, at least in short- and medium terms primarily because China is pursuing peaceful peripheral environment so as to successfully carry out its reform and modernization and to develop its domestic economy and because it is essential for China, whose strategy of exerting its influence as a responsible power, to cooperate with the United States so as to deal with the global economy and security issues arising in the region. More importantly, the United States remains a very crucial investor and trading partner with China, especially the export market.

Finally, ASEAN ought to maintain the continued strategy of balance of powers in economics. That is, ASEAN must (i) ensure a constructive cooperation between China and Japan for the region-wide common interests and their continued support for ASEAN's leadership in the APT process and its driving force in the EAC; and (ii) get the U.S. support and maintain continued economic ties with it as the counterweight to growing China's economic strength. Under this consideration, ASEAN must carefully and diplomatically navigate its relations with each of these powers in order to achieve its ultimate goal of maintaining peace, stability and prosperity in Southeast Asia.

²¹Japan sees ASEAN at core of East Asian community, but stresses U.S. ties". *Japan Today* [<http://www.japantoday.com/category/politics/view/japan-sees-asean-at-core-of-east-asian-community-but-stresses-us-ties>] – accessed on 02 March 2010.

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