1. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations: an introduction

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1. INTRODUCTION

In early August 1967 five foreign ministers – Adam Malik of Indonesia, Narciso R. Ramos of the Philippines, Tun Abdul Razak of Malaysia, S. Rajaratnam of Singapore, and Thanat Khoman of Thailand – gathered at the beach resort of Bangsaen, some 100 km southeast of Bangkok. Contrary to the past mutual animosities among the nations they represented, the atmosphere was demonstratively friendly and relaxed. The ministers played golf, exchanged stories and anecdotes, but also engaged in the serious business of paving the way for the establishment of a new regional organisation. Subsequent meetings followed at Thanat Kohman’s private residence, culminating in the signing of the two-page founding document of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)1 inside the main hall of the Department of Foreign Affairs building at Saranrom Palace in Bangkok on 8 August 1967 (Severino, 2006, p. 1–2). It was third-time lucky because the previous two attempts at building regional organisations – the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) and MAPHILINDO (an abbreviation consisting of the first letters of the three member states: Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia) – had been unsuccessful. In the late 1950s Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first prime minister of independent Malaya, launched the idea of regional cooperation to fight communist underground movements and found an open ear especially with Carlos P. Garcia, the Philippine president. The initiative led to the proposal of a Southeast Asian Friendship and Economic Treaty in January 1959. The proposal received significant support from Thanat Khoman, who was particularly committed to the idea of economic cooperation and tried – ultimately unsuccessfully – to persuade all the states of Southeast Asia, with the exception of North Vietnam, to conclude a regional cooperation agreement. Eventually only Malaya, the Philippines, and Thailand joined forces in 1961 to form ASA, a loose association geared towards economic cooperation (Turnbull, 1999, p. 287). In the case of MAPHILINDO, a 1963 summit meeting convened by Philippine president Diosdado Macapagal was hoped to bring the old – and highly politicised – vision of uniting the Malay peoples in a political union or confederation closer to realisation. The idea dated back to the writings and speeches of Filipino national hero José Rizal, who saw the division of the Malay peoples into the three states of Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia as an accident of colonial history. Neither organisation got off the ground, mainly because the Indonesian–Malaysian Confrontation – better known by its Indonesian term Konfrontasi [confrontation]. Konfrontasi – an armed conflict from 1963 to 1966 caused by Indonesia’s opposition to the creation of the Federation of Malaysia, destroyed any hope of regional cooperation, at least for the time being.

The fact that the process of trial and error resulted in an ultimately successful organisation, ASEAN, which would soon prove to be highly viable, was mainly a consequence of the change of power in Indonesia but also due to the negotiating skills of the Thai foreign minister.
The removal of President Sukarno from power in Indonesia in 1967 and the resulting end to Konfrontasi, as well as the general change in foreign policy strategy under the new president, Suharto, created a climate in which regional cooperation could eventually flourish. Although the Bangkok Declaration stressed the importance of regional economic co-operation and cultural exchange among the young nations of Southeast Asia, the main objective was security. ASEAN was born at a time when the region’s political leaders had strong reasons to believe that their often newly independent countries might be subjected to the turmoil of East–West confrontation in general and the Vietnam War in particular. ASEAN leaders did not want to see the emergence of repeated great power rivalry at their doorstep. Their primary objective was nation building, and they generally shared the view that national development required a balanced regional order, and one in which any alternations to the balance of power would occur peacefully and within an international context of negotiated neutrality. In real terms, there can be no doubt that ASEAN governments shared a favourable disposition towards a US predominance of power in the region and a suspicion of Soviet motives and activities. Although the ASEAN members never made any explicit mention of anti-communist sentiments in their official declarations and documents, it was anti-communism nevertheless that served as an effective common bond. All in all, the preservation of national sovereignty, while avoiding dependence on a single external power, is still considered an essential common principle of the ASEAN states today (Dosch, 2018, p. 168).

A second important approach for the foundation of a regional organisation was to place interstate relations in Southeast Asia itself on a more stable and reliable foundation. When first Brunei (1984) and, after the end of the Cold War, Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar (1997), and finally Cambodia (1999) joined ASEAN, the founding fathers’ vision of an organisation encompassing the entire Southeast Asian region could be achieved even before the beginning of the new millennium. With Timor-Leste, which gained its national independence in 2002, there is an 11th Southeast Asian state that is not yet an ASEAN member.

In the following, we will provide an overview of the evolution and status of, first, ASEAN’s institutional structures and, second, its cooperation agendas. Rather than presenting a one-by-one summary of the individual chapters, our synopsis includes frequent references to the respective contributions to this volume.

2. THE ASEAN MODEL OF REGIONAL COOPERATION

Since the early days of ASEAN, Southeast Asian regionalism has been regarded as a distinctive form of intergovernmental cooperation (usually labelled the ‘ASEAN way’), characterised by sovereignty-based norms such as territorial integrity, equality, non-interference in the domestic affairs of other member states, peaceful conflict resolution, and consensual decision-making. A number of studies have highlighted parallels between ASEAN’s cooperation model and traditional interaction structures of Malay village communities, especially in Indonesia, but also in Malaysia and the Philippines, and to some extent in Thailand. The way of decision-making in ASEAN is based on the principles of *musyawarah* (discussion, consultation), *mufakat* (agreement, understanding), and *gotong royong* (sense of community). As Jürgen Rüland explains, although
often romanticised, the latter were in reality core elements of a localised version of conservative, if not reactionary, Western organic state theory that Indonesian nationalists appropriated and re-interpreted by fusing it with revitalised putative tenets of an extant indigenous social order […] This design of social order served as a unifying ideational alternative to the liberal state philosophy of the colonials, which was equated to exploitation, suppression and dependence. (Chapter 8 in this volume)

In its ideal form, the ASEAN way implies the avoidance of clearly visible polarisation of opinion and the formation of opposition with the objective of ruling out tensions and conflicts within ASEAN in advance. In practice, this usually means agreement on the lowest common denominator (see also Albert Triwibowo, Chapter 18 in this volume). There is also widespread agreement that this approach stands for an alternative regional integration strategy that is not explicitly oriented towards Western models and, thus, forms a counter-model to the deeply legalistic European Union (EU) (Jetschke and Rüland, 2009).

‘ASEAN was conceived as an aspiration, without a well-laid institution’ (Hoang Thi Ha, Chapter 3 in this volume), and it was not until February 1976 that a central secretariat was established. It initially found its home in the Indonesian Foreign Ministry and moved to its own building in Jakarta in 1981, which soon reached its capacity limits and was replaced by two 16-storey towers in 2019. Summit meetings of the heads of government were not on the agenda in the first years of ASEAN, and the first summit took place only in 1976, in Bali. However, due to the increasing complexity of the cooperation process, especially since the decision to establish the ASEAN Community in 2003, there was a growing realisation that the institutional structure of the association was no longer up to the challenges it faced. In this respect, questions about organisational settings and decision-making processes played a central role in the deliberations and negotiations on the ASEAN Charter. Hoang rightly describes the ASEAN Charter, which entered into force in December 2008, as a significant milestone in ASEAN’s institutional development. It confers upon ASEAN a legal personality and sets out a full-fledged ASEAN structure based on three community pillars: the ASEAN Political–Security Community (APSC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and ASEAN Social–Cultural Community (ASCC) (details later in this chapter). The Charter also stipulates the rights and obligations of the member states as well as the areas of competence of all ASEAN organs and bodies as well as their relationships, vertically (from the ASEAN Summit to the three Community Councils and Sectoral Ministerial Bodies) and horizontally (coordinating mechanisms within and among the three community pillars, including the ASEAN Coordinating Council [ACC] and the Committee of Permanent Representatives [CPR] to ASEAN; see Box 1.1).

Even if the Charter defines the formal interaction structures in unprecedented detail and sets out an expanded and strengthened organisational architecture throughout, the established institutional foundations continue to hold. Article 3 of the Charter explicitly defines ASEAN as an ‘intergovernmental organisation’, thus rejecting speculation about the gradual introduction of supranational structures. Article 20.1 also confirms ‘consultation and consensus’ as basic principles of decision-making. The introduction of a majority principle favoured by some members, especially Indonesia and the Philippines, failed due to the resistance of other governments (Dosch, 2008, p. 537). One of the most visible innovations introduced by the ASEAN Charter is the greater frequency of ASEAN Summits, which have been held twice a year since 2009 and can be convened more frequently if needed. The summits take place in the member state that holds the ASEAN chair. As before, the chairmanship rotates annually and is based on the alphabetical order of the country names in English – though exceptions
to this order have been made on occasions. The presiding state also chairs the ACC; the three Community Councils, which correspond to the pillars of the ASEAN Community and their ministerial bodies; and the CPR. Beyond institutional arrangement and in a break with ASEAN’s previous focus on non-intervention and non-interference, Article 2(i) explicitly called on member states to act in ‘respect for fundamental freedoms, the promotion and protection of human rights, and the promotion of social justice’. This new understanding paved the way for a shift in ASEAN’s approach to human rights issues and resulted in the establishment of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights in 2009 and the signing of the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration in 2012 (Berry Desker, Chapter 9 in this volume).

**BOX 1.1 ASEAN’S MAIN DECISION-MAKING BODIES**

The **ASEAN Summit** is the highest policy-making body in ASEAN comprising the Heads of State or Government of the member states. Summit meetings shall be held twice annually.

The **ASEAN Coordinating Council** comprises the foreign ministers of the member states. It meets at least twice a year, prepares for the summit meetings, coordinates the implementation of the decisions taken there as well as the activities of the Community Councils, and reviews the annual reports of the Secretary General on the activities of ASEAN and its Secretariat.

The **ASEAN Community Councils**: The Security Council, the Economic Council, and the Socio-Cultural Council, corresponding to the three pillars on which the ASEAN Community is based, meet at least twice a year, are to ensure the implementation of summit decisions affecting them, report and make recommendations to the ASEAN Summit, and coordinate the activities of the ministerial bodies assigned to their areas of responsibility.

The **ASEAN Sectoral Ministerial Bodies** are to implement the decisions of the summits relating to their areas of responsibility and to cooperate closely in support of community building. According to Annex 1 of the Charter, the Security Community includes the meetings of the ministers of foreign affairs, defence, justice, and transnational crime; the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapons–Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Commission; the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF); and so on, while the Economic Community includes the meetings of the ministers of economy, finance, agriculture, forestry, and energy; the ministers of science and technology, telecommunications and information technology, and transport and tourism; the AFTA Council; and the Mekong Basin Development Cooperation. The Socio-Cultural Community includes the meetings of the ministers responsible for information, culture and the arts; the meetings of the ministers of education, health, youth, labour, social welfare, environment, disaster management, rural development and poverty alleviation; the Conference of Participants to the ASEAN Convention on Transboundary Air Pollution; the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity; the Centre for Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance; the Earthquake Information Centre; the Meteorological Centre; and the ASEAN University Network.

The **ASEAN Secretariat** and the **Secretary General of ASEAN**: The ASEAN Secretariat
mainly facilitates and coordinates collaboration of the Association’s organs and stakeholders. With the rank and status of a minister, the Secretary General oversees the implementation by member states of decisions taken jointly, attends ASEAN Summits and meetings of other bodies, and is responsible for the external presentation of ASEAN policy. He or she is appointed by the ASEAN Summit on the recommendation of the foreign ministers for a single term of five years, following the alphabetical order of the ASEAN countries. The Secretary General is assisted by four deputies. Like the staff of the ASEAN Secretariat, based in Jakarta and headed by the Secretary General, the latter may not take instructions from any external actor; an ASEAN state may not seek to influence members of the Secretariat in the performance of their functions.

The Committee of Permanent Representatives to ASEAN: The Permanent Representatives have the rank of ambassadors, seconded to Jakarta by member states. The Committee supports the activities of the Community Councils, coordinates with the National Secretariats, liaises with the Secretary General and the ASEAN Secretariat, and contributes to cooperation with ASEAN partners.

ASEAN National Secretariats: Established by the member states, these are to coordinate the implementation of decisions taken by ASEAN at the national level, promote awareness of an ASEAN identity, and, thus, contribute to community building.

The ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) began its work in October 2009 and is responsible for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Commission drafted an ASEAN Declaration on Human Rights, which was signed on 19 November 2012.

The ASEAN Foundation aims to support the Secretary General in community building by promoting a sense of identity; people-to-people contact; and close cooperation among business people, civil society, and academic institutions.

Source: Based on Furtak, 2015, pp. 133–134 (revised and updated).

Track two activities complement and support the government level and run parallel to official diplomacy (track one). They ‘can build bridges between people, build confidence, increase trust, correct misperceptions, change the attitudes to the other, and foster mutual understanding. Thus, they have a significant socialising function and serve to improve the already open channels of communication’ (Vannarith Chheang, Chapter 10 in this volume). A special role is played here by the Association of Institutes for International and Strategic Studies in the member states, founded in 1988, several of which are foreign policy think tanks but officially regarded as non-governmental organisations. The network of ASEAN Institutes for International Studies has since been one of ASEAN’s central think tanks. While track one and track two are the uncontested pillars of intra-regional communication performed by governments and academics respectively, the role of civil society in ASEAN is more difficult to grasp. Kevin Villanueva (Chapter 11 in this volume) reminds us that

the face of civil society in ASEAN came to show after the 1997 Financial Crisis. On the one hand, there was a shift in the regional political agenda, signalled by the rhetorical use of the term ‘people
centred’/‘people oriented’, which was itself presaged by the term of a ‘community of caring societies’. Whether this supposed shift or turn was a response to the desire of ASEAN’s leaders to widen political participation, to challenge traditional high-level diplomacy, that is the principle of non-interference in ASEAN, or the consequence of democratic transitions within the member states, trade liberalisation and the pursuit of greater economic integration remains a matter of debate.

Notwithstanding such conceptual issues, over the years numerous civil society organisations have adopted an ASEAN framework for their activities and, thus, contributed to the shaping of an ASEAN identity. Since 2005, the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN Peoples’ Forum has been held annually in parallel with the ASEAN Summit, focusing on human rights and other pressing societal agendas (Eric C. Thompson and Apichai Sunchindah, Chapter 4 in this volume).

After many years in the making, on 31 December 2015 the Association reinvented itself as the ASEAN Community, based on three pillars – the Political Security Community, the Economic Community, and the Socio-Cultural Community – which were defined and specified in three blueprints unveiled between 2007 and 2009. While the ASEAN Community is the result of an institutional evolution and reflects the collective will to strengthen ASEAN’s relevance and cohesiveness, it has not altered the main objectives and direction of regionalism in Southeast Asia. In addition to the Charter, the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 became the Association’s new guiding document, encapsulating its future trajectory. In particular Vision 2025 outlines the updated characteristics of the three ASEAN community pillars and includes a set of action lines on how to achieve the goals of the three pillars. In this context, the ASEAN Secretariat was empowered to facilitate monitoring and evaluation of the various ASEAN cooperation projects, thus sharpening the focus on implementation (Magno, 2021). This is an important new emphasis given that ASEAN has seen impressive institutional development and evolution, but many agreed goals, objectives, and mechanisms of regional cooperation still await full implementation or application. A persistent lack of trust among member states and insistence on the primacy of national sovereignty are customarily cited as reasons or excuses for ASEAN’s difficulties in transforming vision into action. Yet, this is certainly not to suggest that ASEAN’s balance sheet is negative as we will see in the remainder of this chapter and throughout the book.

3. ASEAN FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Has ASEAN as a collective actor been instrumental in, or at least decisively contributed to, maintaining peace and stability in Southeast Asia? It is no exaggeration to say that this question has occupied generations of political scientists. According to the standard narrative, ASEAN is a security community in the sense that going to war with a fellow ASEAN member as a means of problem solving seems unlikely – although such a scenario can never be fully discounted. ASEAN has successfully managed to keep the residual conflicts between the members – especially territorial disputes – on a low-key level. War has never erupted between individual Southeast Asian states since they became ASEAN members. However, to make this argument, one has to subscribe to admittedly arbitrary concepts of what counts as war and discount occasional skirmishes, such as the spilling over of Burmese ethnic conflicts into Thai territory, which resulted in encounters between the troops of Thailand and Myanmar along their joint border in 2001. The violent territorial dispute between Thailand and Cambodia (2008–2011)
over the area surrounding the 11th-century border temple of Preah Vihear resulted in at least 41 casualties but – although this sounds macabre – did not meet the international definition of a war. In 2013, the ‘Lahad Datu stand-off’, a conflict between 235 Philippine militants and the Malaysian security forces reignited the lingering Philippine–Malaysian dispute over Sabah, the former North Borneo, which dates back to colonial times. Adopting the common viewpoint, in these and other cases, the existence of – mainly informal – mechanisms of conflict management in Southeast Asia helped to contain bilateral problems from de-stabilising the region and prevented an escalation of disputes into full-scale military battle. Effective informal conflict management is also said to have mediated more than a dozen additional territorial disputes between individual member states, regular rows over migration issues (especially between Malaysia and Indonesia), and heated discussion on the distribution of resources (e.g., between Singapore and Malaysia about water supply and Indonesia and Singapore about illegal trade in sand). These disputes, as well as the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, show that ASEAN member states have, in practice, been prepared to act collectively beyond the confines of the ASEAN way in relation to conflict management. This is, however, contingent on a number of specific eventualities, including personal agency by some ASEAN elites (Jürgen Haacke, Chapter 6 in this volume). ASEAN’s most visible and high-profile approach to conflict management since the early 1990s is its dealings with the South China Sea disputes, which prominently involve China. However, existing efforts have not yet resulted in tangible solutions to the problem, and the threat of an escalation of the conflict situation persists.

At the same time, the awareness of non-traditional (i.e., non-military) security (NTS) as an essential part of ASEAN’s security agenda has substantially broadened and deepened to the effect that essentially all crucial challenges to human security are covered by regional cooperation mechanisms in increasingly comprehensive and holistic ways. ASEAN as a collective actor has developed suitable response strategies directed at the threats of terrorism, transnational crimes, infectious diseases (such as COVID-19), environmental destruction, and natural disasters, to name but a few. The awareness of NTS problems, as expressed in declarations, agreements, and new institutional arrangements, is important, even though ASEAN can hardly claim to have successfully implemented its strategies across the board. The inclusion of NTS issues in the official cooperation agenda has sensitised a broad range of actors at the regional, national, and sub-national levels for these problems and fostered interaction between the national governments-and civil society (Jörn Dosch, Chapter 7 in this volume).

Through its strong focus on establishing and maintaining regional security and stability, ASEAN has also made a significant contribution to economic development and rapid growth, which, over the past five decades, has outpaced that of many other regions of the world. Between 1970 and 2015 ASEAN’s share of global gross domestic product (GDP) rose markedly from 0.8 per cent in 1970 to 1.5 per cent in 1990 and 2.6 per cent in 2015. This contrasts sharply to, for example, the near stagnancy in the global shares of the Mercado Común del Sur [Southern Common Market] (MERCOSUR) and the Latin American Integration Association (ALADI), two major regional organisations in Latin America (Intal, Jr., 2017, p. 1). The countries of Southeast Asia have rapidly progressed through the ranks of the Human Development Index, led by Singapore, Brunei, and Malaysia (‘very high human development’) and followed by Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam (‘high human development’), as well as Cambodia, Laos, and – according to pre-coup data – Myanmar (‘medium human development’). Thus, all ASEAN states have managed the leap to at least a medium level of development (United Nations Development Programme, 2021, Annex Table A7.1). Even if
Southeast Asia’s economic development is primarily attributable to the respective national development strategies as well as to the favourable geostrategic position of the region, there is no question that regional stability created a favourable investment climate, which, in turn, formed an important pillar of development successes.

Targeted efforts at economic integration, however, evolved slowly. It was only in 1977, a decade after ASEAN’s foundation, that its member states signed a Preferential Trading Arrangement (PTA) as a first serious effort to strengthen regional economic relations. By the early 1990s, tariffs on some 16,000 goods within the PTA framework had been reduced. While this figure looked impressive on paper, it amounted to only about 5 per cent of total intra-ASEAN trade. The PTA nevertheless signified an important milestone as it marked the end of some member states’ – especially Indonesia’s – categorical resistance to trade liberalisation. After several subsequent, and mostly failed, strategies in support of economic integration, a major breakthrough was achieved when, in 1992, the member states agreed on the gradual implementation of an ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). The Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998, however, interrupted the process of realising the AFTA vision. The ASEAN heads of states and governments provided a fresh impetus for realising it at their summit meeting in Bali in 2003. The Declaration of ASEAN Concord II envisioned building an ASEAN economic community to ‘establish ASEAN as a single market and production base’ by 2020. In 2007, the AEC Blueprint set out a framework and roadmap for implementation and shortened the deadline to 2015 (Dosch, 2016). Because the AEC is a continuing project, as Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit shows (Chapter 5 in this volume), ASEAN member states realised a need to re-strategise their economic regionalism amidst rising regional and global challenges. Subsequently, the AEC Blueprint 2025 was concocted to succeed the original blueprint. It provides strategic plans and policy actions to further deepen regional economic collaboration and integration. While ASEAN has not yet developed into a single market in the common understanding of the concept (i.e., a market in which goods, services, and capital can move freely across borders without restrictions), ASEAN members have so far abolished 98.6 per cent of tariff lines among themselves. Furthermore, in some sectors, technical barriers to trade have been reduced through the region-wide harmonisation of product standards. In the area of trade facilitation, the ASEAN Single Window has created an electronic region-wide customs clearance system by linking and integrating the National Single Windows, which govern international cargo handling procedures of individual ASEAN states (ibid).

4. ASEAN FROM THE OUTSIDE IN

Parallel to the expansion and deepening of cooperation within Southeast Asia, ASEAN began to intensify its relations with actors outside the region in the early 1970s. The first substantial achievement was the establishment of the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conferences (PMC) with the organisation’s ‘dialogue partners’, which today include nine states (Australia, India, Japan, Canada, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, the United States, and the People’s Republic of China) and the EU. PMC meetings at the foreign minister level take place annually in conjunction with the ASEAN Ministerial Meetings (AMM) and the meetings of the security-focussed ARF, first held in 1994. The establishment of a regular high-level dialogue programme in the Asia–Pacific region and beyond is undoubtedly one of ASEAN’s greatest achievements. In this way, ASEAN not only succeeded in drawing the attention of the relevant Indo-Pacific
and European powers to the problem areas and potential of Southeast Asia (to a much greater extent than would have been possible for the individual states – even for Indonesia, a middle power – on their own), but also asserted itself as an actor helping to shape the structures of international relations in the Asia–Pacific region. The PMC received its first boost in 1985 through the personal participation of the then US president, Ronald Reagan (Mols, 1987, p. 657; McMichael, 1987, p. 17). The final breakthrough, as the cornerstone of an emerging pan-Pacific multilateralism, came in the early 1990s in connection with the general discussion on institutionalising trans-Pacific economic and security relations after the end of the Cold War. Since the conference series already had a certain tradition, permanence, and, above all, a consolidated organisational structure, it was obvious to assign it a nucleus function in the new Asia–Pacific cooperation process. The main multilateral organisations and dialogue forums existing in the region today, such as the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (founded in 1989), ASEAN Plus Three (1999), and the East Asian Summit (2005), were oriented towards the PMC model and, thus, ultimately towards the ASEAN way. In a further consolidation or rather deepening of its dialogue programme, between 2003 and 2020, ASEAN signed strategic partnership agreements with all ten dialogue partners. In the case of China, relations have already been upgraded to a ‘comprehensive strategic partnership’ (Cheng-Chwee Kuik and Fikry A. Rahman, Chapter 13 in this volume).

Overall, ASEAN can undoubtedly be described as a successful collective actor on the international stage. The strong links that ASEAN members have forged amongst themselves enable them to negotiate and bargain with third-party countries with greater confidence and success. Unlike other groups of non-Western countries, ASEAN as a collective actor has managed to gain global and regional powers’ attention through its well-established dialogue mechanisms, which are considered some of most recognised international fora in the world. Given this, ASEAN has been described as a ‘politico-diplomatic coalition vis-à-vis the outside world’ (Sopiee, 1991, p. 320). Within the international fora established by ASEAN itself but also in multilateral organisations in general, including the United Nations, ASEAN amplifies the voice of its member states and strengthens its members’ collective bargaining power with regard to a range of agenda, including but not limited to the global political economy, environment and climate change, and human rights (Albert Triwibowo, Chapter 18 in this volume). Providing a related perspective of ASEAN’s multilateral utility, Kuik and Rahman (Chapter 13 in this volume) argue that ‘ASEAN’s multi-layered dialogue mechanisms are a sine qua non for the small- and medium-sized states’ collective quest for ASEAN centrality’. When ASEAN published its Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in 2019, it not only acknowledged the global shift of attention from the Asia–Pacific to the Indo-Pacific but also indicated that ‘the governments of Southeast Asia seek to promote their very own perspective on the increasingly contested region. With the AOIP, ASEAN demonstrated that it is determined to maintain centrality and to moderate the increasing polarisation of the region’ (Frederick Kliem, Chapter 12 in this volume). As Kliem explains in detail, the fact that ASEAN is right at the heart of the Indo-Pacific is not just a lucky coincidence of geography but owed at least partly to strategic foresight, when ASEAN expanded Asian multilateralism from East Asia towards the Indo-Pacific with the creation of the East Asia Summit in 2005. By inviting Australia, New Zealand, and India to join the initiative, ASEAN diluted the hitherto multilateral dominance of Northeast Asia. It also recognised India’s importance and that of the Indian Ocean for a more balanced Asian multilateralism. Equally important, ‘by including Australia and New Zealand to the south and India to the west, ASEAN moved Asia’s geographic centre gravity away from
Northeast, thereby placing Southeast Asia quite literally in the geographic centre of Asian multilateralism’ (ibid).

ASEAN’s central position has also been supported – or at least not openly challenged – by extra-regional actors. Most prominently and importantly, President Obama’s strategy, first outlined in 2011, to ‘pivot’ or rebalance US foreign policy to the Asia–Pacific included support for ‘ASEAN centrality’, understood as ASEAN’s lead role in several regional institutions, such as the ARF, the East Asia Summit, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus. Obama elevated Washington’s ties with ASEAN to the level of a strategic partnership in 2016. While relations entered a period of ‘relative drift’ under Obama’s successor, Donald Trump, US policymakers nonetheless sought to integrate ASEAN as part of a broader Indo-Pacific framework and tried to further solidify relations. Joe Biden’s administration has further expanded the US–ASEAN strategic partnership with a view to upgrade relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership (Prashanth Parameswaran, Chapter 15 in this volume). At the same time, despite ASEAN’s official pro-neutrality rhetoric, as manifested in the Declaration on the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality of 1971 and other documents (Emmers, 2018), Southeast Asian realpolitik has always welcomed a strong US role and presence in the region as a decisive contribution to the maintenance of peace and stability. Or, as Prashanth Parameswaran puts it in his chapter, ‘ASEAN policymakers understood the reality that Washington’s capabilities meant that it had an ability to shape threats and opportunities that directly affected the domestic political and economic development of the countries that comprised ASEAN, the regional dynamics between them, and the balance of international relationships they cultivated with other powers’. China, of course, is the elephant in the room.

Relations between China and Southeast Asia have seen a substantial transformation from the days of mutual hostility based on and driven by deep ideological cleavages and the structural dynamics of the early Cold War period to cautious and gradual rapprochement during the post-Mao era to, finally, the full normalisation of relations since the early 1990s. This most recent phase has been accompanied by the strengthening of multilateral channels of cooperation and positive-sum games in economic and security relations. The ASEAN–China Free Trade Agreement, which entered into force in 2010, became a potent metaphor for the economic win–win setting in China–Southeast Asia relations, although individual ASEAN members have benefitted to varied degrees, with Malaysia as the front runner and Vietnam as the most negatively affected economy. At the same time, the South China Sea disputes have developed into a central and largely disturbing issue in Sino-ASEAN relations. Overall, as Alice D. Ba concludes (Chapter 14 in this volume), the relations have seen ‘dramatic shifts and turns […] across six distinct periods – suspicion, alignment, normalised engagement, common cooperation, contradiction, and stabilisation’. Most recently, China’s concerns about the United States, but also Southeast Asian concerns about US–China conflict and its spillover implications for Southeast Asian maritime and economic security, have motivated China to reassure its ‘increasingly nervous southern periphery’. All ten ASEAN states received high-level Chinese attention in 2020–2021, including from Chinese President Xi Jinping. For example, China provided essential support to ASEAN during the COVID-19 pandemic and supported the domestic infrastructure projects of Southeast Asian governments linked to its own initiatives. Equally important, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership of 2020, which is considered a success of the brand of multilateralism favoured by both ASEAN and China and an expression of ASEAN centrality, received renewed momentum during the
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pandemic as a means to stabilise regional supply chains against further economic disruptions (ibid).

Just as China and the United States, regional middle powers, especially Japan, Australia and India, have also been keenly interested in engaging with ASEAN and have generally been courting it for much of its history, as Jatswan S. Sidhu (Chapter 16 in this volume) explains. The primary driver appears to be a realisation that stability in Southeast Asia is of great relevance to Japan, Australia, and India’s security. Of the regional middle powers, Japan’s relations with ASEAN have been particularly close. Despite a lukewarm start to their relations immediately following ASEAN’s inception, the atmosphere of post–World War II reconciliation and, in particular, Japanese reparations; great developmental assistance; and a focus on economic relations allowed Tokyo to gradually gain a strong foothold in Southeast Asia.

The discussion of the ‘outside in’ perspective would not be complete without a reflection on ASEAN’s group-to-group relations with the EU. Since 1972, when ASEAN initiated an institutionalised dialogue with the then European Community, relations have enhanced rapidly but have also had to overcome various ups and downs. For example, through the founding of the Asia–Europe Meeting in 1996, ASEAN–EU relations were reinforced. Amongst the low points of the ASEAN–EU relationship have been the suspension of the inter-regional free trade negotiations in 2009 and the diplomatic challenge of Myanmar’s membership in ASEAN. The latter problem in EU–ASEAN diplomacy relates to the oppressive nature of the military regime in Myanmar before the beginning of the country’s liberalisation process in 2011 and, again, since the latest military coup in 2021. Generally speaking, despite past differences, for example, over the participation of military-ruled Myanmar, the EU – and, specifically, the European Commission – as a collective regional actor appears to be a ‘natural’ partner of ASEAN, allowing an open inter-regional exchange of ideas and practices on a broad range of issues, including but not limited to trade and investment, regional stability and security, good governance, and human rights. Thus, it is a surprise that the up to then most comprehensive compilation of academic papers on the state of Southeast Asian regionalism, The 3rd ASEAN Reader, published in 2015 by the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, did not devote even one of its 84 chapters to ASEAN’s relations with the EU or Europe’s role in the region. This seemingly confirms an often-heard perception of the EU as an also-ran in Southeast Asia. Yet, the role of European actors in Southeast Asia is not negligible and, in fact, the EU has frequently been seen as a normative and soft power in the region. Soft power essentially describes the normative influence projected by states or a group of states in the international system with the help of non-military means (Dosch and Maier-Knapp, 2017). In recent years – Yeo Lay Hwee (Chapter 17 in this volume) refers to the period since 2012 as inter-regionalism 4.0 – the EU has moved beyond being ASEAN’s most important economic partner and has ‘sought to engage ASEAN more comprehensively on political and security dialogue issues […] the EU sees its own prosperity as tied to Asia’s security, thus wanting to go beyond economics and be recognised as an important political and security actor in its own right’ (ibid).

5. A WORD ON THEORY

This introductory chapter started with some reflections on global power constellations as a push factor for ASEAN’s creation. It concludes with some basic theoretical considerations. As Alan Chong (Chapter 2 in this volume) puts it, ‘If theory can be taken to refer to the
establishment of a set of generalisable propositions across time and space for the purposes of enriching cumulative knowledge and fostering the contestation of pre-existing ideas with the aim of reaching refined understanding […] the study of ASEAN must surely be regarded as a most intractable endeavour’. At first glance, ASEAN seems to prove neorealist thinking in international relations. According to this view, the founding of the organisation in 1967 and its evolution during the Cold War can be explained as a product of balance of power considerations. ASEAN’s strong anti-communist posture and the fact that it was set up by states that already had strong linkages with the United States (first and foremost the Philippines and Thailand) could be interpreted as a typical power-balancing behaviour of small and medium states, namely, to jump on the bandwagon of a superpower (the United States in this case) in order not to be absorbed by the other (the Soviet Union). It is not surprising that, for (neo-) realists, ‘Southeast Asia’s turbulent post-war history was proof that under the conditions of anarchy survival constitutes the overriding interests of states in the region. Foreign policy was thus described in terms of self-help and military power’ (Rüland, 2000, p. 422). If that was the case during the Cold War, it has seemingly remained relevant in the post–Cold War era. The economic realities of Southeast Asia’s dependence on external economic powers such as the United States, Japan, the EU, and China for trade and investment seem to underpin the neorealist view of regional order and stability as a function of great power strategic dominance. There seems to be some truth in the neorealist perspective on ASEAN. However, it fails to address the impact of institution building in Southeast Asia on regional peace and stability. Liberal institutionalists challenge the neorealist standpoint by arguing that co-operation among the states of Southeast Asia has generated a set of agreed principles and rules that have increased transparency and trust and reduced uncertainties and hostilities in intra-regional relations. According to this perspective, it has primarily been a process of institution building – rather than, for instance, US bandwagoning – that has facilitated security and welfare in Southeast Asia. That said, Chong’s chapter presents a much more nuanced picture. In fact, he makes the case that ‘International Relations theories of the mainstream varieties have tried very hard to straitjacket the study of this particular regional organisation with disappointing results’. In one of his key prepositions, and drawing on Amitav Acharya’s social constructivist work, Chong finds that ‘ASEAN has remade international relations in its corner of Asia by channeling security and national interest calculations through the quest for defining and redefining identity’ (ibid). In other words, Southeast Asian states (or at least their elites) are said to have forged a strong collective identity among themselves as a result of political, strategic, and functional interactions and interdependencies.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of ASEAN’s general achievements can be summarised in five broad arguments. First, ASEAN is a successful collective actor on the international stage. Since 1972, when ASEAN initiated an institutionalised dialogue with the European Community, it has developed a network of regional and global meetings that today involve more than a dozen global players, including the United States, the EU, Japan, and China. At the core of these activities are annual conferences on economic, strategic, and political issues that affect the region. ASEAN’s successful strategy of networking the region and the wider Indo-Pacific area is remarkable because the existing dialogue fora enable Southeast Asian leaders, ministers, and
senior officials to regularly meet with their counterparts from Washington, Beijing, Tokyo, Brussels, and so on.

Taking advantage of these extensive dialogue networks, even small powers like Cambodia or Laos are in a position to have at least an annual exchange with the US secretary of state or even the US president, for instance. No other groups of nations outside Europe have ever created for themselves such a favourable position within the international system.

Second, is ASEAN’s role as a regional conflict mediator, since the organisation has demonstrated its willingness to find regional solutions to regional problems. The biggest success story dates back to the late 1980s, when ASEAN contributed to the political solution of the Cambodian conflict as a major player in the peace negotiation process. Furthermore, in 1992, ASEAN adopted the ‘Declaration on the South China Sea’, which has often been presented as a potential pathway towards a peaceful settlement of the Spratly Islands dispute, although such an outcome has not yet come to fruition. In 1995, the ASEAN states also signed a treaty that – on paper – bans the development, acquisition, use, testing, and stationing of nuclear arms in Southeast Asia. Since the ASEAN members do not possess nuclear weapons themselves and the nuclear powers, particularly the United States and China, have so far objected to an accession to the SEANWFZ, the agreement is of more symbolic than practical value. However, in 2009, the United States signed an agreement to accede to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation after 17 years of consideration, in an attempt to boost multilateral approaches to regional security. A total of 43 states (‘high contracting parties’) have now signed this 1976 agreement, which has been amended three times (most recently in 2020) and establishes guidelines for the management of intra-regional relations, including mechanisms of conflict resolution.

Third, ASEAN can be described as a partial security community: diplomacy and the existence of – mainly informal – mechanisms of conflict management (but not necessarily effective conflict resolution) in Southeast Asia has helped to contain bilateral problems, including border disputes, from destabilising the region and prevented their escalation into full-scale military conflict. An essential element of the ASEAN security community is its inward-looking nature. Rather than concentrating on external military threats, ASEAN members have favoured a comprehensive security agenda. The member states have worked towards enhancing their security through domestic socioeconomic development. This approach has strengthened their respective national resilience – which is the term used in the ASEAN rhetoric – and, in turn, has led to reduced intra-regional tensions and regional vulnerabilities and enhanced regional resilience. However, it is important to note that the ASEAN security community should not be mistaken for a military alliance, something that ASEAN is definitely not.

Fourth, ASEAN has gained importance as an inter-personal network. High-ranking government officials, scholars, and representatives of the private sector within the ASEAN framework have forged a close network of personal links. In this way, cross-border communications and activities have increased, and interactions have become much easier. If one takes into consideration that, well into the 1950s, the various national elites in Southeast Asia were practically not talking to each other, this network building within ASEAN (with its 1000-plus annual meetings) is one major achievement of Southeast Asian regionalism. It has resulted in transparency and confidence building. However, for many decades, inter-personal network building was mainly restricted to state actors. The ASEAN Charter, in conjunction with the ASEAN Community Blueprints, prescribed a development towards a people-oriented integration process that prominently involves the region’s civil societies. In fact, some large regional
NGOs played an important part in the deliberations that led to the inclusion of liberal and people-centred norms in the Charter.

Fifth, ASEAN is important as a framework for economic development. Taking the aforementioned four aspects together, ASEAN has created for itself a peaceful and stable regional situation. This situation, in turn, has contributed to a conducive climate for ASEAN countries to pursue their national economic development. In terms of regional economic integration, ASEAN still trails behind its own objectives. On paper, the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015 has produced association-wide economic integration centred on a ‘single market and production base’, characterised by a free flow of goods, services, investment, and skilled labour and by a freer flow of capital. However, for the foreseeable future, ASEAN member states will continue to have significantly less than comprehensive regional economic integration. While progress has been made in reducing or eliminating intra-ASEAN trade tariffs, substantial non-tariff barriers to trade persist. Intra-regional trade as a percentage of the ASEAN members’ total merchandise trade has stagnated at between 22 and 25 per cent since the early 2000s. At the same time, ASEAN has advanced in harmonising customs procedures – which have become more efficient and transparent – and, as a result, the cost of importing and exporting has reduced. Furthermore, some common technical standards for electronic and electrical products, among others, have been developed and implemented.

Any analysis of ASEAN ultimately needs to appreciate the organisation for what it is: the single best chance for peace the region ever had. Although desirable, ASEAN cannot be expected to be an effective problem-solving actor of regional governance; it is and will remain a problem management mechanism (Kliem, 2017, p. 9). At the same time, it is fair to note that Southeast Asian regionalism is not only gripped by sometimes unrealistic expectations on the part of external actors and observers but also by a gap between vision and reality that ASEAN has largely created itself. Many of the well-advanced and elaborated agreements that, on paper, govern the management of security, regional order, and economic integration lack full implementation or have even not achieved any practical relevance at all. However, in the sixth decade of its existence, ASEAN can be expected to be sufficiently mature and settled to deliver on existing agreements. Formal institutions matter regardless of how successful an organisation might have been in going down informal lanes of addressing problems of a regional character.

NOTE


REFERENCES


