

ASEAN – THE CORE OF A ROBUST SECURITY ARCHITECTURE FOR THE ASIA PACIFIC?

by *Mary Fides A. Quintos*

The increasing magnitude of emerging and recurring security concerns in the Asia Pacific is forcing the rethinking of the region's security landscape. In particular, the capability of ASEAN-centered multilateral processes to provide peace and stability has come under scrutiny, compelling ASEAN to undertake reforms to maintain its relevance in the region.

ASEAN Dialogue Partners have challenged ASEAN-centered multilateral processes over the years. In 2008, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd floated the idea of an Asia Pacific Community that would presumably replace ASEAN. Most recently, Xi Jinping called for the expanding role of the Conference for Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) by transforming it into a security dialogue and cooperation platform that will become a basis for a new, all-encompassing regional security framework led by China. The Australian and Chinese proposals indicate two things. First, they indicate that the existing architecture appears no longer effective in responding to the various security concerns in the region, with established security mechanisms being diverse but not distinctive, serving only as venues, and unable to produce substantive results since progress appears limited to functional areas. Although the abundance of institutions with overlapping agenda ensures alternative avenues for discussion in times of institutional deadlock, it also leads to selective participation. States join institutions where their interests can be accommodated, which consequently leads to the overall ineffectiveness of the architecture. Second, the initiatives indicate doubts harbored by the great powers about the ability of ASEAN to take the central role in multilateral security processes. Differences among ASEAN member states over hard security issues such as maritime and territorial disputes tend to overshadow the need for unity to address regional concerns.

ASEAN has been wary of proposals coming from its external partners because these could dilute its influence and marginalize its status in the region. Fortunately for ASEAN, these proposals have not gained much traction in the region because they are exclusive, can be an extension of strategic competition, and are seen as partial only to major powers' interests. Thus, ASEAN could and would likely remain central because states still prefer a balanced and inclusive arrangement— something which ASEAN is able to provide. Without addressing the deficiencies, however, the value of ASEAN and its institutions could still diminish in the long run.

The Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) Study Group on Regional Security Architecture recommended that the existing architecture be improved rather than replaced, given the widespread acceptance of regional norms and principles. Moreover, the established activities and platforms of existing institutions have already been tried and tested in the region. The CSCAP Study Group further recommended the streamlining of ASEAN-centered institutions for division of labor, efficiency, and wiser allocation of resources. Existing institutions should be rationalized to perform specific functions, with the East Asia Summit (EAS) focusing on strategic direction, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) on security dialogue, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) on functional cooperation. The CSCAP proposal can be quite limiting for some, as institutions tend to expand their agenda in order to avoid irrelevance. For instance, leaders may be confronted with the dilemma between continuing the old practice of ad hoc institution-building that can provide them more freedom in terms of agenda-setting and the relatively difficult task of designing a consolidated and efficient architecture based on a grand plan that can generate greater accountability and commitment.

ASEAN leaders agreed during the May 2014 ASEAN Summit in Myanmar to further strengthen and consolidate the EAS and measure the coherence and effectiveness of various programs and activities within the EAS. It is therefore logical for the EAS to serve as the main framework in designing the security architecture because it has broad remit. Its composition is also of

the highest level among ASEAN-led institutions, giving it authority and influence in terms of providing strategic direction. However, the challenge is how a hierarchy of institutions will be acceptable to all regional players, especially since the ARF is the largest among ASEAN-led institutions in terms of membership. Some states exercising significant influence in the ARF or in other institutions may fear being sidelined, especially if the EAS takes precedence in importance. There is also the possibility that other states may lobby for inclusion in the EAS, posing some challenges related to membership contraction and expansion.

Tensions among current EAS members will also have to be overcome to develop a more substantive agenda for the region. The EAS was established as a product of compromise among ASEAN and its Dialogue Partners. China wanted an ASEAN Plus Three grouping, which includes itself, Japan, and South Korea, while Japan lobbied for the inclusion of some extra-regional states because of concerns about China's dominance in the region. ASEAN, needing to pursue a balancing strategy in order to break the deadlock and maintain its role in the driver's seat, established the criteria of having substantial relations with ASEAN and accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in order to be considered for membership in the EAS. This eventually led to the inclusion of Australia, India, New Zealand, Russia, and the United States. Given the dynamics within the EAS, the success of the regional security architecture rests on ASEAN's leadership amid major power rivalry. ASEAN's role in the region in managing the interaction between great and rising powers while giving voice to smaller states has been indispensable in this regard.

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The ever-changing nature of the Asia Pacific security environment calls for a periodic review and assessment of existing institutions. ASEAN is facing the major challenge of integrating not only its members and institutions, but also its external partners. The only way it could maintain a central role is if there is solidarity within itself. For ASEAN to remain in the fulcrum of the region's security processes, it has to continue building on its achievements, and the full realization of the ASEAN Community will help increase ASEAN's legitimacy and credibility in the region. This will also encourage external actors to play a more active role in shaping a mature regional security architecture and establish deeper commitments in the region through enhanced and multifaceted engagements.

The creation of a more robust set of multilateral processes that form part of an overall security architecture to accommodate the comprehensive understanding of security is a slow and gradual process. It will also entail a great deal of political will to be able to transcend national interests and espouse regional interests in order to respond to security concerns that not only spill over other issue areas, but also do not respect political boundaries. The goal of a stable and orderly environment through the creation of a security architecture that is not dominated by a single or concert of powers and one that will work best for the region should be a task that not only falls on Asian countries, but also on extra-regional states involved in the entire security process. The building of a regional community in the Asia Pacific is a vision that has to be shared by all stakeholders in the region. 🌸

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