



POINTS OF VIEW

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What's Inside the Centrality of ASEAN?

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As the great-power competition intensifies, the ability of ASEAN to exercise its centrality is in question.

Having no formal definition, the word “centrality” has been acknowledged as having equal weight to the other 3Cs, namely community, connectivity and charter. In the Article 1 (15) of the ASEAN Charter, centrality is noted together with another keyword “proactive role”. In his speech delivered at the international symposium on East Asia beyond the global economic crisis in 2009, Surin Pitsuwan, Secretary-General of ASEAN at that time, underlined that ASEAN should make an effort to be a “center of growth”, “center of gravity” and “fulcrum of emerging regional architecture”. To achieve this purpose, two keywords provided by Surin were: unity and coordination.

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In this article, I argue that the centrality of ASEAN is contextual. It does not take place in a vacuum. Drawing lessons from the evolution of ASEAN during the Cold War, it seems that ASEAN centrality proves effective under two situations.

First, it is easier for ASEAN to exert its centrality when other players had not risen up to challenge the United States leadership. At that time, ASEAN became a key strategic option for the five founding members to ensure their survival. A significant progress made by the members at that time was the declaration of Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in 1971. Strategic importance of ASEAN became more explicit after the United States' withdrawal from the region after the Indochina War. Leaders realised the need to hang together by adopting the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in 1976. The Treaty is legally binding and provides a guidance for external partners in engaging with ASEAN, later recognised as the "ASEAN Way". A key message of ZOPFAN and TAC is clear: ASEAN should be able to exercise its agency and free from any foreign intervention. Moreover, problems in ASEAN should be solved by goodwill and collective efforts of its member states. An example at that time was the constructive role of ASEAN during the Cambodian Conflict from 1978 to 1991.

Second, the end of the Cold War in the 1990s offered an opportunity for ASEAN to institutionalise the bloc and expand its regional interest to economic dimension. A series of success included: the ASEAN Free Trade Area in 1992, the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1994, and the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty in 1995. Following the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, ASEAN played an essential role as a catalyst in facilitating the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) Summit in 1999. The 1990s was also a golden period for ASEAN as the grouping endorsed the ASEAN Vision 2020, aiming to be "outward looking, living in peace, stability and prosperity, bonded together in partnership in dynamic development and in a community of caring

societies”. In May 2000, the APT reached the agreement to set up the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralisation (CMIM), the first regional currency swap arrangement with the purpose of addressing short-term liquidity difficulties and providing financial support to the existing international financial arrangements.

However, global and regional context in today’s world is different. Although the grouping has been successful in adopting various regional documents and running hundreds of regional meetings annually, it seems that the bloc’s ability to exert its centrality is not as strong as it was or is expected to be. Therefore, it is time to rethink the centrality of ASEAN within and beyond the region.

In his special talk organised by the International Studies Center (ISC) in March 2024, Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan stated that centrality is to “make yourself useful to others”. Building on his word, it seems that dialogue partners have realised strategic importance and economic potentials of ASEAN. In June 2024, there are more than 50 High Contracting Parties to the TAC.

What ASEAN has is “power to convene”. An example is the negotiation of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) that led by ASEAN throughout the process. The agreement was first initiated by Indonesia in 2011 and concluded in 2019 during the Thailand’s ASEAN Chairmanship.

Nonetheless, ASEAN needs to improve its “power to convince”. Centrality should be considered a means to reach agreement or to solve issues, not an end in itself. The “ASEAN Way”, consisting of peaceful way in conflict resolution, consultation, voluntary participation, mutual respect and non-intervention, could be an alternative for the current geopolitical situation. The region should also be open for minilateralism that aligns with regional interests.

Moreover, it is interesting to learn that ASEAN has several working documents that are useful to review the current state of issues that are critical to the future of ASEAN and propose practical recommendations to policymakers such as ASEAN Maritime Outlook, ASEAN State of Climate Change Report and ASEAN Communication Master Plan (2018-2025). The presence of these documents reflects usefulness of ASEAN to its policymakers and peoples. Capacity of the ASEAN Secretariat should be also strengthened.

Strategic location is a valuable asset for ASEAN to exercise its centrality with other dialogue partners. The region is at the intersection of Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Strategy and Belt and Road Initiative. Given that ASEAN is surrounded by various key dialogue partners, including China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia and India, it is necessary for ASEAN to maximise the benefits by bringing them onto the chessboard and play with them. To improve negotiating power, ASEAN should consider “regionalisation of supply chains” as its economic strategy by increasing intra-ASEAN trade and investment as well as employing ASEAN-led regional mechanisms such as CMIM to reduce external risks.

Last but not least, ASEAN should create more opportunities and platforms to engage with future generations such as gatherings of early- and mid-career professionals, young scholars and practitioners, media people and etc.

An essential lesson I learned from our predecessors is: what keeps ASEAN forward and central to an evolving regional architecture is the spirit of working together among ourselves, not political or financial support from outside powers.