

Is the ASEAN Getting Regional Security Right?

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Assessing the contributions of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to regional security can be a rather perplexing exercise. ASEAN has no shortage of admirers who readily valorise ASEAN as, according to one formulation, “the success story of the Third World.” Referring to the grouping as “a well-functioning, indispensable reality in [Southeast Asia],” Kofi Annan, the late former secretary general of the United Nations, once opined that ASEAN “is a real force to be reckoned with far beyond the region.”² The historical record also suggests that ASEAN states have collaborated among themselves, successfully in many instances, on both political and security issues such as counterterrorism, maritime security and conflict management more broadly. The fact that no major war has hitherto broken out among the ASEAN member states has even led some observers to suggest the Southeast Asian region has enjoyed a “long peace.”³ Unlike the European Union (EU), which was awarded the 2012 Nobel peace prize for its efforts to advance international peace, ASEAN’s contributions to regional peace and security have been considerably more modest but arguably no less significant in their own regional context.

On the other hand, the historical record is also peppered with myriad examples of the organisation’s inability and unwillingness to act when regional situations have demanded concerted action. More often than not, ASEAN has fallen short on its own express aspirations as was the case in 2015 when its member states failed to realise their goal to form a regionally integrated community out of Southeast Asia by the stipulated deadline. In this paper, I take stock of ASEAN’s shortcomings and successes as a security actor in Southeast Asia and beyond. Remarkably, for a small grouping of relatively weak nations—the 10-member countries are Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam—ASEAN’s diplomatic and security influence extends well beyond the confines of Southeast Asia. I therefore look at how ASEAN has fared in this regard by comparing two of its wider security offshoots, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus). I then conclude by discussing a couple of lessons that could be drawn from ASEAN’s experience and applied to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region where regional cooperation and architecture are concerned.

ASEAN in Southeast Asia

The facts on the ground persistently underscore the wide gap between aspiration and reality in ASEAN. If anything, the challenge of evaluating its contributions to regional security has a lot to do with the incessant mismatch between what its declarations, treaties and action plans promise, and what the Association has realistically accomplished. Indeed, the clash between creed and deed is not just a matter of a dearth of capacity, consensus or resolve among members, even though that is significant. Fundamentally, in the world of ASEAN, creeds have long served as cover for deeds aimed at enhancing the security and prosperity of member states,

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but which for various reasons could not be acknowledged publicly lest the grouping's intentions are misunderstood by unfriendly powers—a practice going back to the time of the Cold War when ASEAN sought to counter suspicions that it aspired to be a military alliance, or worse, that it was a Western project. This has led to an incommensurability between ASEAN's achievements as an institution and its declared goals. But the gap between aspiration and reality does not mean ASEAN has failed as an organisation. More likely, ASEAN can be said to be a victim of its own success. Its achievements in post-conflict regional reconciliation and renovation—such as between Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore after 'Confrontation' (the low-intensity conflict launched by Indonesia against the latter from 1963–1966), and between the capitalist and communist

parts of Southeast Asia after the Cold War⁴—as well as in the establishment of regional architecture in the post-Cold War Asia-Pacific, where ASEAN enjoys *primus inter pares* status, are undeniable.⁵

Arguably, it is these successes that have spurred ASEAN leaders to seek a more robust regionalism at the start of the 21st century. That aspiration is embodied in the 2003 ASEAN (or Bali) Concord II, which envisaged the formation of the ASEAN Community comprising three "pillars," namely, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), each with their respective blueprints. Welcomed by its supporters, the process of community formation has nonetheless encountered a host of problems, such that ASEAN has had to extend the deadline for the realisation of a fully functioning community from 2015 to 2025.⁶ The effort to form the AEC—regarded ironically as the most feasible and achievable of the three pillars or sub-communities, if you will—met with significant hurdles. Despite having completed nearly 80 per cent of the "to do" list for the realisation of the AEC—largely in areas such as tariff reduction and the facilitation of trade and investment liberalisation, according to the AEC "scorecard" maintained by the ASEAN Secretariat—the AEC's more intractable issues—most importantly, eliminating non-tariff barriers, creating the 'ASEAN Single Window', and increasing the intra-regional mobility of skilled labour—have proved to be way more difficult to resolve.⁷

And if the AEC, the pillar on which the ASEAN states have lavished most if not all of their attention and energy, remains incomplete, then realisation of the APSC, given some of the seemingly intractable



security challenges and territorial disputes confronting the ASEAN states, could prove harder to achieve. ASEAN's apparent inability to reconcile intramural differences and tensions and to maintain its institutional cohesion within a shifting regional strategic environment have raised basic concerns for its continued relevance to regional security.⁸ With its unity under threat from great power rivalry over the South China Sea, ASEAN has found it even more difficult to realise the APSC, let alone the third pillar, the ASCC. Hitherto ASEAN and China have agreed to a "single draft" code of conduct (COC) for the South China Sea, which ostensibly would serve as the basis for negotiations leading to the COC, although it remains unclear when the COC itself would materialise.⁹ What is likely to emerge is a COC whose provisions are weak and nonbinding. Nor has ASEAN been able to do anything to slow down, let alone deter, China's aggressive reclamation and militarisation of atolls and islands in the South China Sea. If anything, despite a five decades-long exercise in confidence-building among its member-states, the persistent trust deficit among the ASEAN states continues to limit the extent and depth of intra-regional cooperation and integration.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, all this has led to the charge that the goal of ASEAN regionalism has little to do with achieving concrete progress and more to do with maintaining the grouping's so-called "centrality" in the regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific.¹¹

Notwithstanding its manifold constraints and limitations, ASEAN has nonetheless shown an ability to get things done when the member states have the collective will, as exemplified by recent institutional developments in ASEAN's 'war against terror'. The common threat of Islamic State-inspired terrorism—

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as evidenced by the war in Marawi in the southern Philippines from March to October 2017—has intensified and deepened cooperation among the ASEAN countries.¹² ASEAN defence leaders have also launched the "Our Eyes Initiative" (OEI), a cooperative arrangement aimed at countering terrorism.¹³ The present membership of the OEI includes Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Arguably, the OEI is an example of security cooperation conducted informally on an "ASEAN minus x" basis, as the entry into force of the ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism in May 2011, which the ratification of the convention by just six of the ten ASEAN member states, also seemed to underscore.¹⁴ Spurred in part by a shared desire to prevent another incident like Marawi from occurring and to preclude the region from "becoming like the Middle East,"¹⁵ OEI envisages the establishment of centres in each ASEAN member country whose purpose would be to facilitate intra-regional communication, intelligence sharing, and counterterrorism cooperation among and across national defence (as well as homeland security) establishments. Reportedly, four non-ASEAN members of the ADMM-Plus—Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the U.S.—have been identified by ASEAN as the first group of partners with whom the ASEAN states could collaborate as part of OEI.¹⁶ However, participating countries would first have to manage and overcome the deep-seated mistrust that persists among them. In this respect, it is noteworthy

that Indonesia's defence minister felt the need to defend OEI as having "nothing to do with politics" but would "purely [be] an initiative to fight the existence of terrorist groups and maintain peace in our region."¹⁷

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Going forward, the ASEAN states are likely to seek new and innovative approaches in response to the growing scale and complexity of the threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia. Under Singapore's chairmanship of ASEAN for 2018, the organisation will establish a cooperative framework—labelled the "3R" for resilience (building resilience in preventing terrorist attacks), response (coordinating counterterrorism responses to address ongoing threats), and recovery (recovering from any terrorist attacks that do occur)—to tie the region's counter-terrorism initiatives together.¹⁸ Reportedly, the 3R framework not only provides a coherent and comprehensive regional approach against terrorism, it also supposedly enhances ASEAN's centrality as well as coordination and partnerships among the various counterterrorism initiatives of the ASEAN member countries. The 3R calls for the ASEAN states to strengthen their capabilities to respond to chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) threats from terrorist groups and rogue actors.¹⁹ Indeed, the potential employment of CBRN weapons by such groups renders the integration of the armed forces to the overall counterterrorism strategy of ASEAN states all the more crucial. In that regard, ASEAN has announced the establishment of an ASEAN Armies

Information Sharing Workshop (AAISW) as a way to enhance cooperation among the region's armed forces in response to CBRN threats.²⁰ Not unlike the OEI, the 3R remains a work in progress. Crucially, it acknowledges the historical differences and varying force capabilities among the ASEAN states and seeks as such to enhance counter-terrorism cooperation among their respective militaries by leveraging their niche capabilities to better complement the efforts of home front or internal security agencies, which hitherto have led the counterterrorism efforts in most ASEAN countries.²¹

ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific

ASEAN has also had a significant influence—quite remarkable for a group of relatively weak Southeast Asian nations—on regionalism in the wider Asia-Pacific region. Together with its dialogue partners, ASEAN had a hand in creating many of the region's multilateral institutions including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus). That said, Asia-Pacific regionalism has been described as a frustrating enterprise,²² and not without good reason. Hailed when launched in 1994, the ARF has since become a poster child for what many see as profoundly wrong about ASEAN-led regionalism, namely, the ASEAN's perceived inability to provide the requisite regional leadership owing to its institutional ineffectiveness and inherent disunity among its members, particularly in light of its susceptibility to the destabilising impact caused by great power rivalry. The ARF has gained a reputation as a serial underperformer. Formed in 1994 to considerable fanfare, the 27-member ARF has as its declared aim, expressed in its first Chairman's Statement, "to develop a more predictable and

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constructive pattern of relations for the Asia-Pacific region.”²³ The ARF informally issued a concept paper in 1995 that laid out a three-stage roadmap on security cooperation that envisaged the institution evolving as a mechanism for confidence-building to preventive diplomacy and finally to conflict resolution (the last of these amended subsequently, at China's insistence, “elaboration of approaches to conflicts”). The concept paper also introduced two sets of measures, the first comprising low-hanging fruit deemed readily harvestable, the second comprising a set of more ambitious and challenging activities. Modalities such as inter-sessional support groups and inter-sessional meetings were established to support the implementation of the ARF's goals.

However, progress proved painfully slow to achieve with the ARF seemingly unable to evolve beyond confidence-building. Differences arose between its more activist members (e.g., Australia, Canada, the European Union, Japan and the U.S.) which supported the establishment of concrete preventive diplomacy (PD) mechanisms—such as early-warning systems, fact-finding missions, enhanced good offices of the ARF chair for mediation—and conservative members (e.g., China, Myanmar and Vietnam) worried that the implementation of PD would grant those activist counterparts licence to intervene in their internal affairs.²⁴ It has been suggested that by serving as a platform for dialogue between China and the U.S. in 1996 when Chinese missile exercises aimed at intimidating

Taiwan and influencing its presidential election led to the deployment of two U.S. carrier battle groups to the Taiwan Straits, the ARF indirectly conducted PD.²⁵ That said, ARF members finally agreed to and issued a PD work plan—predicated, disappointingly so, on a very basic and narrow definition of PD—but not until 2011. Likely, the size of the ARF and its rigidly held consensus-based convention—which member countries wielded as a diplomatic weapon against one another—clearly stood in the way of progress.²⁶

In the mid to late 2000s, the ARF added a “practical” dimension to its activities, chiefly in selected non-military or non-traditional areas such as counter-terrorism, disaster relief, maritime security, non-proliferation and disarmament. At the 2009 ARF meeting in Bangkok, the ARF members adopted a vision statement which committed its 27 participants to “building a region of peace, friendship and prosperity” by 2020. They followed up a year later with an action plan for implementing the vision statement, which outlined goals for enhanced collaboration in a number of areas of cooperation, namely, counter-terrorism, transnational crime, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), maritime security, and non-proliferation and disarmament. Supporters of the ARF welcomed this development as a step forward in the anticipated evolution of the ARF from a talk shop to a “more action-oriented” institution—a logical step given that the Asia-Pacific region has increasingly played host to militancy, natural disasters and humanitarian crises, maritime disputes and the like.²⁷

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At best, the ARF plays second fiddle to the ADMM-Plus (discussed below) in the effort to implement practical cooperation strategies since it lacks the military assets and operational dispositions of the latter. Moreover, by shifting its emphasis to non-traditional security concerns and as a consequence of its assiduous avoidance of strategic challenges facing the region, the ARF runs the risk of “disqualifying” itself as a prospective PD actor, let alone a regional actor of consequence. If anything, the ARF has gained the unfortunate reputation for sidestepping major challenges and adopting bland positions when such issues happen to force their way in—as, say, in the ARF’s non-action vis-à-vis the territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas. The widespread perception that the ARF had become irrelevant as a security actor has led a number of regional leaders to call for a new regional architecture.²⁸ This perspective is not shared by everyone. As one analyst has argued, “The ARF has not only lived up to its original mandate but has bolstered interstate cooperation and helped contribute to a more secure regional security landscape.”²⁹ However, given the ARF’s record of misses rather than hits, it has to be said that positive appraisals form a minority view.

In contrast to the ARF, the surprise has been the progress in regional security cooperation achieved by the ADMM-Plus. Formed in 2010, the membership of the ADMM-Plus comprises the 10 ASEAN countries and Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, and the U.S. It started as

a triennial event, became a biennial one on the basis of a recommendation made by the sixth ADMM meeting in 2013, and reportedly will begin meeting annually after 2018. Not unlike the ARF, the ADMM-Plus is designed both as a mechanism for multilateral security dialogue and consultation as well as a framework for non-traditional security cooperation. To date, ADMM-Plus members collaborate in seven designated areas, namely, maritime security, counterterrorism, HADR, peacekeeping operations, military medicine, humanitarian mine action (or demining) and cyber security. Experts’ Working Groups (EWGs) have been formed to facilitate efforts in each of these areas.

In just a short span of time, the ADMM-Plus has visibly outstripped the ARF in regional cooperation.³⁰ Joint activities undertaken by all 18 members have grown in frequency and complexity. Between 2011 and 2017, a total of nearly 50 EWG planning sessions and table-top exercises and at least six full troop exercises took place under ADMM-Plus auspices. The scale and scope of some of these activities are by no means trivial; for example, in a combined maritime security and counterterrorism exercise held in Brunei Darussalam and Singapore (as well as in the waters between them) in May 2016, a total of 3,500 personnel, 18 maritime vessels, 25 aircraft and 40 special operations teams took part.³¹ In 2017 ADMM-Plus members agreed to a code of unplanned encounters at sea (CUES). As the 2018 chair for the ADMM-Plus (as well as all other ASEAN-led regionalisms including the ARF), Singapore is pressing

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for a similar code to cover the region's congested airspace. Because of these perceived successes, overtures have been made by a number of countries and institutions wishing to join the ADMM-Plus, such as Canada, France and the EU.³²

In contrast to the ARF, what has been interesting about the ADMM-Plus is its development of a capacity to engage in PD, even though the grouping has never formally declared its intentions to be a PD actor. In 2016, the ASEAN core of the ADMM+ adopted the terms of reference for the ASEAN Militaries Ready Group on HADR, following their endorsement, a year earlier of the standard operating procedures (SOP) for the utilisation of military assets for HADR under the framework of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER). This new SOP was meant to augment the existing Standard Operating Procedures for Regional Standby Arrangements and Coordination of Joint Disaster Relief and Emergency Response Operations (SASOP), a template defining the roles and terms of reference for both provider countries and recipient countries that would enhance interoperability among ADMM-Plus armed forces in collective disaster management.³³ In the ASEAN countries themselves, supporting infrastructures and assets include the Regional HADR Coordination Centre (RHCC) based in Singapore and the UN Humanitarian Response Depot (UNHRD) based in Malaysia. Along with a whole host of elements in the 2015 version of the APSC blueprint, these developments could and indeed should be understood properly as PD measures.

In other words, unlike the ARF which hitherto has produced a work plan on PD but little else, the ADMM-Plus is far likelier to realise a role in PD.

Granted, the challenges of the ASEAN Community, whose implementation has been postponed to 2025, one should pause against undue speculation about the future prospects of the ADMM-Plus. Its potential to be a bona fide PD actor is there, but so too are the manifold constraints. There are reputational costs at stake as the lesson of the ARF has clearly demonstrated.³⁴ Regrettably, the lack of action on ASEAN's part in addressing the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis is a black mark for ASEAN.³⁵ But it serves as an important reminder that even institutional actors with experience and success in PD—including the EU—do not always live up to expectations.³⁶ ADMM-Plus countries also face the prospect of participant fatigue stemming from the high operational tempo of exercises and—should the ADMM-Plus prove incapable of handling hotspots like the South China Sea³⁷—low (or worse, negative) returns on their investments. For instance, at its ministerial meeting in Kuala Lumpur in November 2015, ADMM-Plus countries were forced to scrap a planned, albeit non-mandatory, joint statement on the South China Sea as a result of intractable differences among themselves. Nor can it be ruled out that countries and militaries would not use their participation in the ADMM-Plus for deterrence purposes since their exercises provide a ready platform for them to display their defence assets and lift capabilities. For example, it has been argued that multinational rescue efforts in response to Cyclone Nargis, Typhoon Haiwan and the MH370 airline mishap revealed proxy but no less intense security competition among relief sending states, turning HADR missions into “competitions of compassion.”³⁸ Even if deterrence were not the prime motive behind a nation's involvement in HADR, unintended consequences could at times arise.³⁹ The irony is that even seemingly “altruistic”

missions like HADR and search-and-rescue could end up unintentionally exacerbating security dilemmas and driving security competition between would-be rivals.

Lessons for the MENA Region

According to Ross Harrison, there are a number of relevant lessons the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region can draw from ASEAN's experience in regionalism.⁴⁰ First, ASEAN's experience suggests that the pursuit of regional cooperation and the establishment of architectures in support of cooperation in the midst of turbulence is not a quixotic quest, no matter how dire the state of international relations in the Middle East might seem to be. In its formative years, ASEAN furnished the requisite regional framework for its founding members to engage in post-conflict reconciliation in the wake of confrontation. It fulfilled a similar function among once divided Southeast Asian states following the end of the Cold War. The ASEAN story suggests, with the right conditions, that institutions like the Arab League, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation initiative can become the frameworks that support regional reconciliation in the MENA region, despite its past and present troubles. That ASEAN successfully expanded in the 1990s to include its former "foes"—Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam—while, around the same time, establishing an Asia-Pacific wide grouping in the ARF imply that a MENA-wide architecture is not impossible. Second, although ASEAN's emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference can at times be a hindrance to deeper cooperation, Harrison argues counter-intuitively that this low bar was in fact what helped to catalyse regionalization because it furnished "low-risk, legitimacy-

enhancing initiatives around which states can cooperate."⁴¹ Put differently, ASEAN succeeded in combining regional cooperation with state-building, not least because its sovereignty-enhancing brand of regionalism allowed its member states to focus on state-building with minimal interference from each other and the outside world. A regional normative framework that stresses the sanctity of state boundaries is arguably what the MENA region, replete with legitimacy deficits, requires as a prerequisite for regional cooperation.⁴²

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Nonetheless, ASEAN's experience is also a cautionary tale regarding the dangers of inflated expectations. To be sure, despite its many perceived flaws and shortcomings in implementing its own declared goals, ASEAN does appear to have gotten some things right in regional security. This certainly seems to be the case with the ADMM-Plus. Yet it bears reminding that ASEAN's problems derive in part from a sense of aspirational overreach, where its express promises and the expectations these generate far exceed ASEAN's organisational design and capacity. As the late Michael Leifer aptly reminded, ASEAN and its wider regional offshoots are not "peace processes" but are at best confidence-building enterprises.⁴³ Leifer intuitively understood that ASEAN-led arrangements are primarily designed for conservation rather than innovation, no matter the grandiloquence of their declared aspirations.⁴⁴ Conservation

involves hard work, particularly for a vastly complex and complicated region like the Asia-Pacific whose states continue to regard one another with distrust and suspicion.⁴⁵ Attempts to innovate through more ambitious forms of regional cooperation must necessarily take into account conflicting national priorities that could and likely would hinder the realisation of collective regional goals. Trustees of regionalisms, whether in Asia or in the MENA region, would do well to bear this in mind.



Endnotes

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- 3- See, Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 5, 11; and, Timo Kivimäki, "The Long Peace of ASEAN," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2001), pp. 5–25.
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- 6- ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2015). <<https://asean.org/asean-community-vision-2025-2/>>
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- 12- Tan See Seng, "Three challenges for ASEAN in military's growing role in fighting terror," *The Straits Times*, 13 September 2018, p. A25.
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