ASEAN: building a Political-Security Community

Since its inception in 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been a key foreign policy and security player in the region. In an effort to put cooperation on a more structured basis, ASEAN's 2007 Charter establishes a Political-Security Community (PSC) as one of the organisation's three pillars (the other two being the Economic and Socio-Cultural Communities). The following text rounds up ASEAN's activities in the foreign policy and security fields.

Ensuring peace

From the very start, ASEAN has acted as a guarantor of regional peace. Like the EU, it has helped to bring stability to a formerly turbulent region (for example the 1963-66 *Konfrontasi* or undeclared war between Indonesia and Malaysia, and Communist insurgencies). Successive enlargements have also integrated former Cold War adversaries (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam) into the regional forum.

ASEAN countries do not have a regional military alliance (though Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines have defence agreements with non-ASEAN countries). Instead, they have signed up to a Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (1976 – also open to non-ASEAN states) and a Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (1995). In addition, annual meetings of ASEAN defence ministers (ADMM) since 2006 – and with counterparts from eight partners (ADMM-Plus) since 2010 – facilitate cooperation and dialogue on defence.

ASEAN as a key international actor

Again like the EU, ASEAN has given its member states a stronger role on the world stage than they could have played individually. It has initiated several fora with regional partners, making it one of the key players in the Asia-Pacific region alongside China and the United States:

- ASEAN Plus Three (APT)/ASEAN Plus Six: ASEAN countries + China, South Korea, Japan + India, Australia, New Zealand. Forum for macroeconomic policy coordination, trade facilitation, etc.
- East Asia Summit (EAS): ASEAN Plus Six countries + Russia, US. Holds annual summits following ASEAN summits to discuss 'broad strategic, political and economic issues'.
- ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF): ASEAN countries + 17 Asian, European, Australasian and North American countries. Dialogue on security issues including defence, peacekeeping, and nuclear non-proliferation.
- ASEAN also cooperates with individual countries, holding regular summits with ten Dialogue Partners including Australia, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States.

The Political-Security Community – a turning point?

ASEAN differs from the EU in that it prefers to operate on the basis of informality, consensus, non-binding decisions and non-interference in internal matters – an approach known as the ASEAN Way. However, its weak response to the 1997 financial crisis highlighted the limitations of this informal approach and was one of the reasons for the adoption of the 2007 Charter, followed in 2009 by a Blueprint on a Political-Security Community as one of ASEAN's three future pillars, to be established by 2015.

The blueprint introduces a more structured approach: with clear parallels to the EU, decisions are taken by a PSC Council comprising national foreign ministers assisted by a committee of permanent representatives. It also adds new areas for political-security cooperation (e.g. combating crime, humanitarian assistance, and promoting democracy and human rights) to the existing cooperation instruments (ARF, ADMM, etc.).

Turning the vision of a Political-Security Community into reality

The blueprint does not have legal force, and the measures it proposes merely have the status of recommendations for action by the member states. Most of them are fairly vague and unambitious –

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exchange programmes, seminars, training, sharing best practices – potentially useful in building trust and creating a culture of cooperation, but not enough to achieve a genuine regional community.

Looking at the proposed measures summarised below, there is little evidence that the new approach has added much to earlier cooperation.

Security and defence

Two PSC blueprint proposals – publication of a joint Security Outlook reviewing regional security issues and establishment of an ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation – were implemented in 2013. However, a proposed early-warning mechanism to prevent regional conflict has yet to be developed.

Not much progress has been made in handling actual/potential conflicts – ASEAN failed to prevent hostilities between Thailand and Cambodia over a disputed temple in 2011, nor has it convinced China to sign up to a code of conduct regulating territorial disputes in the South China Sea. On the other hand, even though joint military exercises are not envisaged in the blueprint, ASEAN plans its first ever joint naval exercise in the Malacca Straits in 2015 – a significant step forward.

Combating crime

The blueprint proposes various non-specific measures to 'build capacity' and 'enhance cooperation'. While some progress has been made (e.g. on combatting piracy), this mostly reflects initiatives by individual countries and smaller groupings such as trilateral patrols of the Malacca Straits unrelated to the PSC.

Disaster management, humanitarian assistance

The blueprint envisages 'joint effective and early response', and several joint exercises have been held since then. However, ASEAN's performance in its first real test, Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, was disappointing.

Promoting democracy

Although 'strengthening democracy' is stated as an aim, the PSC process itself does little to embody democratic values – no involvement of parliaments or civil society, no transparent review – and the measures it proposes in this field are confined to seminars, research and education.

Human rights

In line with the blueprint, an ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) has been set up, but it lacks independence (its leadership is directly appointed by ASEAN governments and is accountable to them), it has only a consultative role, and it does not handle specific cases. An ASEAN Declaration of Human Rights drawn up by AICHR has been criticised for making human rights secondary to concerns such as 'national security, public order ... [and] public morality'.

Barriers to a more effective political-security community

Many obstacles remain: decision-making procedures in the new PSC Council still reflect the 'ASEAN Way', making it hard to adopt and enforce decisions. Differing priorities can obstruct common ASEAN external policy positions (e.g. a meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers in July 2012 failed to adopt a statement on a territorial clash between China and the Philippines due to Cambodia's close relationship with China). Moreover, as ASEAN has few resources of its own, implementation is entirely dependent on the member states, some of which lack the necessary political will and capacity. ASEAN member states have not taken any steps to overcome these long-standing issues.

Outlook

ASEAN remains a key external policy and security player in the region. However, the new PSC has not added much. Given the many barriers to further progress, this seems unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

The European Parliament's Resolution on the future of EU-ASEAN relations (15 January 2014) acknowledges ASEAN as a major international actor, calls for further progress towards political integration, advocates involvement of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA) in this process, demands stronger action on human rights, is concerned about territorial disputes in the South China Sea, recommends EU-ASEAN cooperation to alleviate global tensions, and urges the EU to continue supporting the region.

This is one of a trio of publications on ASEAN; the others cover the developing Economic Community and Socio-Cultural Community.