

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

STRATEGIC FORUM

INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES

20010927 044

Number 85, October 1996

ASEAN and Regional Security

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Conclusions

1. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) contributes to U.S. political, economic, and security interests in the Asia-Pacific region. As Asia's power increases relative to other regions of the world, the U.S. stake in ASEAN's continued success grows. Yet, U.S. engagement in the region, relative to its activity in Northeast Asia, remains limited.
2. Current plans for the expansion of ASEAN from 7 to 10 members may put the organization at odds with U.S. policy in the region. Expansion may also threaten the Association's stability since new members may have significantly different interests and needs, diminishing the organization's cohesiveness along political and economic lines. Its regional security dialogue, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has already expanded its membership to 21 dialogue partners. This expansion may exacerbate the forum's tendency toward process rather than substance.
3. The ARF remains a useful organization for cooperative security, however, cooperative security in Southeast Asia has inherent limitations; above all, it can never substitute for the relations between China, Japan and the United States. Relations among these three major powers could have profound consequences on the peace and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region in the next century. If ASEAN and the ARF cannot control conflict or discuss the core regional issues such as China, the Korean peninsula, and Russia, then other fora for such discussion must be sought. In that case, the U.S. ought to consider a Northeast Asian security mechanism to handle the serious strategic issues of the region.
4. The U.S. can help establish a defense ministerial dialogue but it must work with ASEAN member states to focus such discussions on regional security issues. As recent tensions in the Taiwan Strait and riots in Indonesia suggest, the U.S. must not take for granted the current Southeast Asian peace; it must work actively to promote it.

Background

ASEAN was established in 1967 by five Southeast Asian countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines. Brunei joined in 1984. Vietnam was admitted in 1995. The organization is likely to admit Laos and Cambodia in 1997, and Burma by the year 2000.

Before 1967 it was possible to think of Southeast Asia as a region in name only. The countries of the region enjoyed regional proximity, but little else. In 1960, for example, for every Thai who visited

neighboring Burma or Cambodia, there were 200 who went to England, France, or the United States. Times have indeed changed, and it can be argued that ASEAN is largely responsible for creating the increased sense of regional identity. While this unity is certainly desirable, that alone does not explain the need for the United States to become more deeply involved in the region.

The nations of ASEAN are the fastest growing consumers of U.S. goods and services today. If current trends continue, by the end of the first decade of the next century, ASEAN will be the United States' second largest trading partner, with two-way trade totaling more than \$300 billion. The U.S. government thus has great self-interest in pursuing policies capable of handling relations with the region's predominant multilateral trade organization, ASEAN, as well as with each of its member countries on a bilateral basis. The current peace in Southeast Asia, which has provided the conditions necessary for the promotion of incredible economic growth, cannot be taken for granted. The United States must actively pursue bilateral and multilateral options for contact with the nations of Southeast Asia.

U.S. Interests in ASEAN

Politically and economically, Southeast Asia is gaining international weight and influence. In the next 15 years, the 10 countries that are likely to comprise ASEAN will have a combined population of 560 million people at an average age of 20. Between 1965 and 1995, the economies of Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore grew at an average rate of 7 percent per annum, far surpassing the world average growth rate of about 3.5 percent in the same three decades. Within the next 15 years, the combined gross domestic product of those 10 ASEAN nations will likely reach \$1 trillion.

Beyond Southeast Asia's growing economic importance is its direct significance to traditional U.S. security concerns. The United States has three basic interests in East Asia:

- maintaining open access to markets
- preserving open sea lanes of communication, and
- ensuring that no one power, or group of powers, dominates the region.

Historically, Southeast Asian nations have worried about the dominance of China or Japan and they know that U.S. power alone provides a balancing weight to Northeast Asian power. They therefore accept and quietly encourage U.S. presence in the region.

Recent U.S. promotion of private commercial interests, however, has been pursued at the expense of traditional U.S. security and political interests in Southeast Asia. The Congressionally-mandated closing of two U.S. consulates in the region has contributed to questions about the permanency of American presence in Southeast Asia. The recent reaffirmation of the U.S.-Japan security relationship and the deployment of U.S. aircraft carrier battle groups to the Taiwan Strait before and after Taiwan's presidential elections have, however, demonstrated America's continuing commitment to the region. While there is undeniably a link between U.S. security and the success of its private commercial interests, there is clearly no substitute for attentive formal diplomacy.

ASEAN in Asia

The East Asian nation on which attention is most acutely focused is China. As its economic rise is matched with military modernization, China's neighbors to the south worry about its growing influence,

its power projection capabilities, and the specter of a great power arms race or perhaps another Sino-Japanese conflict. The inclusion of the Indochinese states in ASEAN, particularly Vietnam, has complicated the Association's relations with China. Despite the history of bellicose relations between the two countries, Vietnam has been careful not to view ASEAN as a potential anti-Chinese bloc. In the past, the organization's response to China has been accommodating, with a few specific exceptions, including the South China Sea. In the future, as China becomes increasingly powerful, ASEAN's approach must mature accordingly.

The organization's handling of Burma is an issue of some dispute between the United States and ASEAN. Burma has been receptive to various ASEAN overtures and has even joined the ARF. This affiliation may begin to draw Burma away from its dependence on China, but U.S. policymakers place a higher priority on pressuring that nation to end its abusive and brutal violations of human rights.

The prospect for economic growth among ASEAN members also points to the potential for increased military capacity. This leads to concern about the possibility of a Southeast Asian arms race. To address these concerns, cooperative security in the region needs to evolve further. The ARF was established in 1993 as a context within which region-wide security issues could be addressed. As it continues to grow, however, its effectiveness is likely to decrease proportionally, a result apparent at the recent ARF meeting in Jakarta.

The inclusion in ASEAN of more mainland members in the subregion will inevitably result in the increasing influence of China in all of the group's deliberations. At present, however, China is content with the ASEAN model due to its consensual nature as well as its independence from the other two regional powers, the United States and Japan.

Much of ASEAN's success and cohesion has to do with concern about long-range trends of Northeast Asian power. Recent conflicts in the South China Sea provide little comfort to ASEAN countries. ASEAN remains focused on economic and diplomatic issues. It does not actively promote cooperative security, nor does it address core military issues. For the most part, ASEAN follows instead of leads. It provides a forum for discussion which is in and of itself significant, however, it has yet to develop into a serious forum for solving regional problems. Since 1967, ASEAN has reflected the nature of its member nations, and even as it expands it continues to do so. Nevertheless, strategic issues have continued to define ASEAN, rather than the other way around.

Even representatives of ASEAN member nations acknowledge that the organization emphasizes process over substance. Despite this procedural emphasis, ASEAN has contributed to an inclusive and open regional multilateral architecture. It was instrumental in the creation of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and was responsible for the putting aside of the Malaysian proposal for an East Asian Economic Caucus, which would have excluded the United States.

ASEAN has also been instrumental in supporting a Track II mechanism, the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP), designed for the discussion of regional security issues. It has become the non-government means for pushing ahead the ARF.

The Future Course of ASEAN

Founded as a regional economic organization, ASEAN has the potential to serve as a politically- and security-oriented organization. The growth of China's economic and military power is a potential threat to Southeast Asia and may prove a test of ASEAN's ability to exercise influence on more than just

economic issues. The drive to expand ASEAN membership to include Cambodia, Laos, and Burma may jeopardize its cohesion and could set the organization at odds with U.S. policy, particularly as it pertains to human rights issues. It may also threaten ASEAN's structural integrity and effectiveness, making it more vulnerable to outside influence. There are three reasons why this might be so.

First, ASEAN is based on consensus, something that will be increasingly hard to achieve as it expands. Procedurally, new members may be a drag on decision-making, which is already a difficult process for the organization. The adoption of a policy of majority agreement would create a second-class membership, given the huge disparities between the organization's richest and poorest members. As a result, ASEAN will likely continue to talk through, rather than try to actively solve problems. Conflict prevention is informal at best, with no prospects for change. The current mechanism has worked well to the present, but it is unclear how well it will function when faced with the serious issues of the region, particularly in Northeast Asia.

Second, China's influence will grow as more mainland countries become members of ASEAN. The expansion could also create serious substantive problems. More mainland member states, bordering either China or India, will inevitably force a shift in the organization's interests. That could mean the organization would increasingly impinge on U.S. interests, making ASEAN a less attractive or willing partner for coping with the new challenges of balancing a rising China and a growing India. Overall, it is likely that the United States' bilateral ties with countries of the region will continue to be of greater importance and utility than the formal multilateral one with ASEAN.

Third, other expansion, such as the inclusion of India and Burma in the ARF this year, could make further progress difficult. With the inclusion of India, for example, the complicated disputes of South Asia have been introduced into the ARF. Some have even argued that the ARF's diplomatic energies will now be increasingly dedicated to debate about the negative effects of expansion, to the detriment of the inter-sessional dialogues which are the actual backbone of the young organization.

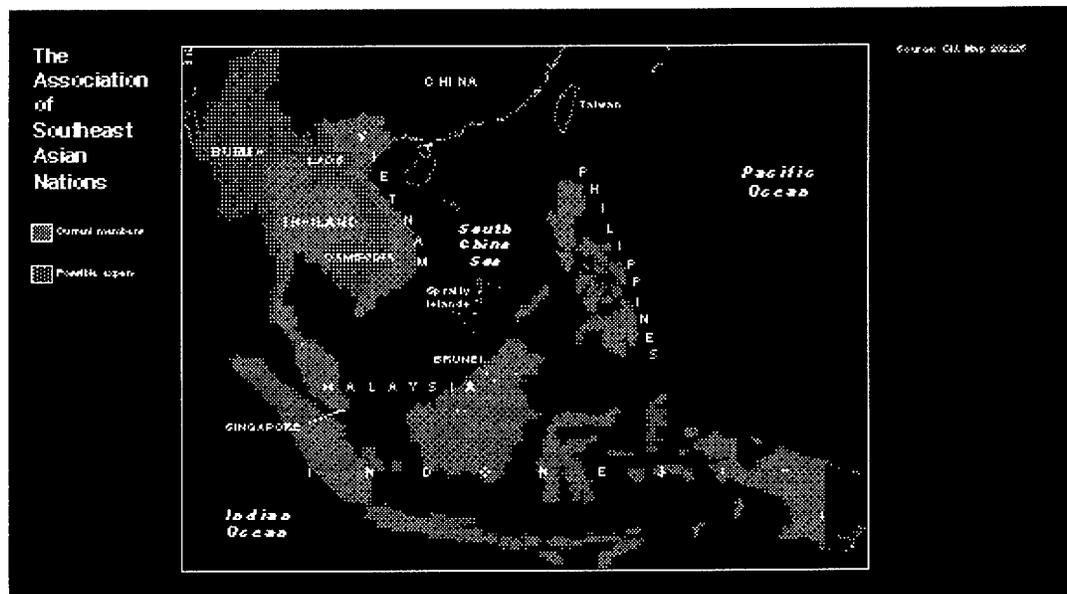
This is not to say that the ARF has not played a useful role in the past or that it is incapable of evolving into an even more effective mechanism for the resolution of regional disputes. It is clearly striving to play the role of an inclusive, pan-Pacific organization capable of managing regional security dialogues and attempting dispute resolution. It may, however, be spreading itself too thin to be effective.

The ARF proved its value when China was forced to defend its actions on Mischief Reef, and the ARF's existence, it can be argued, ultimately led to Chinese retreat on that issue. With every addition of a new country to the membership of the ARF, however, the dynamics of its effective operation become increasingly hard to manage. The ARF's process for handling regional disputes must also evolve with the changing membership in order for it to contribute to regional security. As an approach to improving the international environment in which the ARF's participating members function, the forum can be said to be succeeding. It was never intended to provide a means for conflict management nor should it be depended upon to do so. The ARF can expect to play a useful role in building cooperative security in Southeast Asia, but it cannot guarantee that China, Japan and the United States will avoid major conflicts of interest in the years ahead; and it is precisely this clash of interests, in particular between China, on the one hand, and Japan and the United States, on the other, that could undermine peace and prosperity throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

The consequences of ASEAN expansion tend to point to the need for regional defense discussion, including the United States, perhaps separate from ASEAN membership. At the same time, the United States should expand bilateral contact with specific ASEAN members. The most important caveat for

American policymakers to remember is that the ARF and other regional groups should not be called upon to serve as substitutes for healthy bilateral relations between the United States and the nations of the region. The United States should support multilateral dialogue when there is potential for it to make significant progress. There is room for both bilateral and multilateral diplomacy.

Bilateral relationships will continue to be the most important aspect of American relations with nations of the region. The United States is uniquely positioned, however, to promote regional multilateral dialogue. The challenge for U.S. policymakers is to help Southeast Asian nations attain their objectives, while also securing the interests of the United States.



The original

idea for this Strategic Forum stemmed from discussion at "ASEAN and U.S. Geostrategic Interests," a policy discussion organized by Georgetown University, the National Defense University, and the U.S.-ASEAN Council for Business and Technology, in June 1996. Dr. Patrick M. Cronin is Acting Director of Strategy and Policy Analysis at INSS. He can be contacted at (202) 685-2368, or via the internet at croninp@ndu.edu. Emily Metzgar is conducting research for the Asia-Pacific team of INSS while completing a graduate degree at the George Washington University. She can be reached via the internet at metzgar@ndu.edu. Both can be faxed at (202) 685-3972.

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Editor in Chief - Hans Binnendijk

Editor - Jonathan W. Pierce

INTERNET DOCUMENT INFORMATION FORM

A . Report Title: ASEAN and Regional Security

B. DATE Report Downloaded From the Internet: 09/27/01

**C. Report's Point of Contact: (Name, Organization, Address, Office
Symbol, & Ph #): National Defense University Press
Institute for National Strategic Studies
Washington, DC 20001**

D. Currently Applicable Classification Level: Unclassified

E. Distribution Statement A: Approved for Public Release

**F. The foregoing information was compiled and provided by:
DTIC-OCA, Initials: __VM__ Preparation Date 09/27/01**

The foregoing information should exactly correspond to the Title, Report Number, and the Date on the accompanying report document. If there are mismatches, or other questions, contact the above OCA Representative for resolution.