THE ROLE, ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES OF THE ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS (ASEAN)

Duan HAOSHENG, Liang CANYU*

Abstract: The establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a miracle of diversity. This article discussed three current ASEAN Studies hot topics: the ASEAN Community, the ASEAN Way, and the ASEAN Identity, which comprise the ASEAN as an important regional intergovernmental organization in Southeast Asia. Based on numerous reviews of ASEAN institutional development and Southeast Asian international relations (IR), this article was written from the institutional top-level design and case studies in an effort to articulate the ASEAN Community's establishment, challenges, and resolutions. This article is devoted to demonstrating a real impression of ASEAN's role and place in contemporary international relations.

Keywords: ASEAN Community, ASEAN Way, ASEAN Identity, Institution

INTRODUCTION

The Overview of the ASEAN Establishing Community under Globalization

After the Cold War, the ASEAN changed the role of the anti-communist alliance. In 2015, the ASEAN established the ASEAN Community, which aims to achieve harmonious and peaceful regional development, thereby

---

promoting the economic, political-security, and socio-cultural development of the member states. The construction of the ASEAN Community actually consists of the construction of three parts: the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), and the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), respectively (Our Communities, 2022). The ASEAN expects that the construction and interaction of these three communities could achieve the harmonious and peaceful development of each member state and the region. In the late 1990s, the financial crisis seriously influenced the globe, and Southeast Asian countries suffered tremendous losses. Subsequently, Southeast Asian countries realized that individuals could not be safe alone in a community filled with globalization (Wang, 2000). In the 21st century, terrorism and extremism spread worldwide, and the ASEAN members were some of the victims (Hamzani, 2020; Haosheng, January 2022). However, the rise of regional emerging economies and China's fast rejuvenation with high-speed economic growth simultaneously bring opportunities and challenges to Southeast Asia (Ting, 2017). The occurrence of the series of events makes Southeast Asian countries realize that their influences on the global stage are minimal. In order to cope with this situation in a long-term strategy, Southeast Asian countries wish to build an alliance, strengthen unity to improve their international influence and discourse power, and adopt a consistent consensus on external issues to support each member's development while protecting regional security. This is the original intention of constructing the ASEAN Community.

The *Status Quo* of the Construction of the ASEAN Community

Three ASEAN communities were not formed at the same time. The ASEAN initially proposed the construction of the ASEAN Community in 2003, and the project should have been completed by 2020. Soon afterward, at the ASEAN Summit 2007, the date of completing the ASEAN Community was moved up to 2015 (Kuala Lumpur Declaration on The Establishment of the ASEAN Community, 2015). In fact, only the AEC was hastily formed in 2015. The formation of the ASCC and the ASPC is a long-term and arduous task because some challenges and constraints exist within the ASEAN Community. In addition, in order to guarantee the regional and members' common interests in building a community, the ASEAN needs an independent sense of integrity, that is, the ASEAN Identity. Secondly, the ASEAN Way is a concrete manifestation of the ASEAN Identity's "diversity in unity" and the collective construction of the ASEAN Community.

The ASEAN Identity

"One Vision, One Identity, One Community" is the common sense of all ASEAN members, which has been deepened and substantialized following the formation of the ASEAN Community in 2015 (ASEAN Community Progress Monitoring System (ACPMS) 2017, 2017). Based on the comprehensive understanding of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025, the primary goal of the ASCC is to contribute to achieving a people-oriented, dynamic, and harmonious ASEAN Community that is aware and proud of its identity, culture, and heritage with the strengthened ability to innovate and proactively contribute to the global community (ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, 2020). Furthermore, the building of the ASEAN identity is a participatory ASEAN community-constructing process for all government officials, students, children, youths, and all stakeholders among the ASEAN members. Rodolfo C. Severino (2007) has studied the socio-cultural communities of Europe, Latin America, and the ASEAN. He affirmed that the ASCC is the key to building the ASEAN identity and spillover to the sustainability of the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). Therefore, the development of the ASEAN Community requires coordination among the three pillars.

The ASEAN Way

The ASEAN has experienced many years of turmoil and war and has expressed its desire to maintain regional peace. In fact, since 1967, the ASEAN has been successful in maintaining regional peace and stability. It proposed the ASEAN Way to conduct decision-making through a lengthy discussion and consultation process to achieve a shared understanding of the common development agenda. Scholars believe that the principles of the ASEAN Way have contributed to the region's efforts to maintain peace. However, recently, the ASEAN Way has been criticized for incurring institutional challenges in building the ASEAN Community. Firstly, scholars agreed that the informality and looseness formed the principle of flexibility of the ASEAN Way that corresponds to the ASEAN Community's inclusiveness (Acharya, 2014). However, the principle of flexibility does not imply efficiency and effectiveness in dealing with public affairs. Secondly, the ASEAN Way's principles of decision-making through consensus and non-interference force the organization to adopt only those policies that satisfy the lowest common denominator. Decision-making by consultation-

consensus requires members to reach an agreement before the ASEAN can move forward on an issue. The ASEAN countries have their own method of integrating the national economy, which they refer to as the ASEAN Way economically. This method is used in the development of the unified regional market under the AEC development agenda, which includes the freedom of goods, financial capital, and skilled labor to flow freely between the ASEAN countries. For example, the CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam) have huge socio-economic disparities with the other six ASEAN members, and the principle of flexibility can counterbalance their gaps and allow cooperation at an appropriate speed. Nevertheless, the Asian financial crisis in 1997 has confirmed that it lacks effectiveness and cohesion in dealing with public crises (Aminuddin & Purnomo, 2017). Thirdly, the ASEAN Way's principle of inter-governmental cooperation has conspicuous elitism and nationalism. The Eminent Persons Group (EPG) is the most representative one (Moon & You, 2017). Therefore, many policies and practices of the ASEAN are top-down and non-participatory, which means they will encounter difficulties in improving the participation of civil society in building the ASEAN Community. Moreover, the ASEAN Way seeks to establish a consensus on issues and follows a principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of the ASEAN members. Under the non-interference principle of the ASEAN Way, human rights violations are considered local issues within a country and are not open to involvement from other ASEAN states. The ASEAN Way principle shields each member country from external involvement in its internal issues while encouraging collaboration and good ties among members. Nationalism, the basic norms of sovereignty and non-interference, are mutually interdependent in coping with transnational issues. This principle condition is one of the components of the challenges. In the case of Myanmar, the 2021 Myanmar *coup d'état* created a prominent number of refugees migrating to neighboring countries, such as Thailand, Laos, and China's Yunnan Province. Due to the high nationalism, sovereignty, and the principle of non-interference, Myanmar's coup d'état could not be resolved by the ASEAN Community framework hitherto. (Sullivan, 2021) In addition, the increased number of refugees exacerbated the difficulty of the COVID-19 pandemic control, thereby causing dissatisfaction and the crisis of non-traditional security within the ASEAN members. As for the economic recovery in the post-pandemic period, the ASEAN Community's role will be a primary impetus for promoting regionalization and cooperation. Hence, this condition will be a conspicuous barrier.

THE CHALLENGES IN EACH ASEAN COMMUNITY

The ASEAN Economic Community

In terms of constructing the AEC, the ASEAN members face two main challenges. First of all, there are huge development gaps among the ASEAN members. Based on each member state's development situation, different countries have different economic foundations and developing rhythms (for example, the economic gaps between the CLMV and Singapore or Thailand) (Giang & Thanh, 2007) Therefore, the ASEAN cannot let economically advanced members stop developing while waiting for the economically laggard ones to catch up. Moreover, the economic laggard members are not able to develop in the short term. Secondly, the ASEAN has a severe trade deficit, and the amount of trade among the member states is far from enough. More trade is happening with non-ASEAN countries.

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community

Southeast Asia is a multicultural and multiethnic region with a complex history (Haosheng, 2020). Briefly speaking, the challenge of constructing the ASCC originated from its diversity. The ASEAN members have a diversity of cultures, ethnic groups, religions, and ideologies. Diversity is a rapier; one side represents regional inclusiveness, and the other is an obstacle to building the ASCC. For example, ethnic conflict is an interminable issue in Myanmar, such as the tense conflict between the Islamic Rohingya people and Buddhist majorities. Moreover, the ASEAN contains multifarious forms of regimes. The diversity of political structures incurs political distrust that can impede the development of the ASCC and even influence the development of the APSC.

The ASEAN Political-Security Community

With the deeper step toward the ASEAN political-Security regional integration, the ASEAN has developed and expanded important regulations, including the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia. However, there are some challenges in the APSC construction process that can be briefly summarized into three parts: different social systems and regimes; historical territorial issues; and non-traditional security issues. Therefore, the first uncertain factors are those brought by the accession of new members. Several

ASEAN member states have historically experienced colonial experiences. As such, the social systems formed after gaining independence are different. In the early stages, all the ASEAN members took the capitalist road. However, with the accession of the CLMV, the original organizational structure has changed and brought new challenges to the ASEAN (Severino, 2007). Furthermore, there are uncertain factors among the ASEAN members themselves. These member states have not only different social systems but also different regimes. Almost all the political systems in the world can be found in these ten member states. The degree of democratization in these countries is uneven, and some members are in the primary stage of democratization, which will inevitably lead to a conflict between domestic conservatives and radicals (such as in the case of Myanmar). Naturally, these uncertainties can affect the development of the APSC.

Table1 – The Forms of Regimes of the ASEAN Member Countries

Countries	Forms of Regimes
Brunei	Absolute Monarchy
Cambodia	Parliamentary Constitutional Monarchy
Indonesia	Presidential Republic
Laos	The System of People's Congresses
Malaysia	Parliamentary Constitutional Monarchy
Myanmar	Presidential Republic
Singapore	Parliamentary Republic
Thailand	Dual System of Constitutional Monarchy
The Philippines	Presidential Republic
Vietnam	The System of People's Congresses Note: The Table is made by the author

Second, there are potential security risks due to historical issues among the member states. Such issues are mainly manifested in bilateral or multilateral boundary line issues, territorial issues or territorial sea issues, island ownership issues, historical and cultural relics' ownership issues, etc.

Territorial sovereignty is an irreconcilable issue among the member states. The aftermath of Western colonization, ambiguous maritime sovereignty demarcation, and maritime resource competition in the South China Sea resulted in fierce territorial and maritime disputes. These disputes seriously harm the building of the ASEAN Community. For instance, on July 22, 2008, Thailand rejected the assistance of the ASEAN in resolving the Khmer-Thai border dispute about the ownership of the Preah Vihear Temple (UN help sought over temple row, 2008). The continental shelf disputes in the Gulf of Siam and territorial disputes in the South China Sea are critical regional conflicts involving some ASEAN countries and China. Although the ASEAN and China also reached a framework for the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea in 2017, which is of great significance to maintaining regional peace, the official Code of Conduct has not been finalized yet. At the same time, some Southeast Asia scholars questioned the ASEAN's internal unity. From an ASEAN perspective, Sino-Cambodia rapport is an influential factor in ASEAN's handling of regional disputes and ASEAN solidarity. In the case of the South China Sea issue, Cambodia unilaterally halted issuing a joint statement after the meeting in Phnom Penh in 2012 (Asian nations fail to reach an agreement on the South China Sea, 2012). At the China-ASEAN Kunming Meeting in 2015, scholar Parameswaran (2021) thought that Laos and Cambodia had impeded other ASEAN countries from reaching an agreement on how to deal with China's claims on disputed territory in the South China Sea again. Under the influence of territorial disputes, it is difficult for ASEAN members to maintain solidarity and construct political mutual trust. In fact, the ASEAN has already adopted some conventions to promote regional political-security cooperation, such as the ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism and the ASEAN Convention against Trafficking in Persons. In order to enable disaster response, maritime security, and peacekeeping, the ASEAN has also established the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and the ADMM-plus for military cooperation with its partners (ASEAN Secretariat, 2018). However, both cooperation and competitive relationships among ASEAN member states are also the third point that poses the ASEAN political-security challenge. At present, this complex relationship hinders cooperation in the field of traditional security. At the same time, the complex ethnic, religious, cultural, and other aspects of Southeast Asia also pose challenges to cooperation in the fields of traditional and non-traditional security. (Wang, 2018) The most obvious is the relationship between Singapore and Malaysia in the industrial chain, or Laos and Thailand in cultural tourist resources.

THE RESOLUTIONS AND FUTURE STRATEGIES

The ASEAN Economic Community

If the ASEAN wants to build a thriving economic community, it needs to balance trade between the member countries and non-member countries while ensuring economic and trade cooperation among the member countries. Furthermore, while encouraging the introduction of advanced technology to improve efficiency and skills, it should promote the export of more products rather than self-sufficiency to ensure the balance of economic development among the member countries and avoid increasing economic polarization.

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community

First, we should clarify the purpose of building the ASCC. The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Plan of Action points out the goal of building the ASCC, and its core content mainly includes four front-line points: establishing a community of mutual trust and mutual assistance; forming collective identity and enhancing the cohesion among member states through gradually developing cultural exchanges and cooperation; expanding the field of the social and cultural community and advocating the harmonious development between man and nature; and establishing a corresponding security system to prevent the harm caused by the crisis. Therefore, in order to meet the challenges of building the ASCC, the ASEAN should earnestly implement the countermeasures emphasized by the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Plan of Action and Asian Charter: everyone should enjoy the same rights and development opportunities and should not be treated differently because of nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, language, and cultural background; explore everyone's potential and let everyone participate in social development and competition in different ways; give fair treatment and care to vulnerable groups that have been neglected for a long time to avoid possible bullying; when dealing with environmental problems, we should not only consider the present but also pay attention to the harmonious coexistence and sustainable development between man and nature. Finally, the ASEAN must face up to the fact of complex ethnic diversity and the problems arising from cultural diversity; provide a broader range of means of livelihood and employment opportunities by constantly narrowing the educational gap of

people in various regions to make people more inclusive; ensure that every nation can enjoy equal rights and status; and strive to eliminate the differentiation and opposition between different ethnic groups.

The ASEAN Political-Security Community

As for coping with the challenges of building the APSC, the following suggestions are put forward. First, to carry out bilateral and multilateral security cooperation and move the center to a higher level in the security field. Second, to carry out security cooperation between the member states and non-member states on the basis of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia. Third, to give full play to the role of United Nations laws and regulations and carry out practical work in the field of security. In addition, it is added that the sovereignty of other countries should be respected in the process of building the APSC, but if necessary, the "non-interference" principle of the ASEAN Way can also be explained to realize the maximum interests of the member states. Finally, in terms of extra-regional cooperation, in addition to cooperating as much as possible, it is more critical to follow the ASEAN Centrality to avoid losing the main control in the competition among big countries (US-China). In addition, the ASEAN countries can have a deeper understanding among the ASEAN member states through non-traditional security cooperation, which will help member states get rid of the long-term constraints caused by traditional security to improve political mutual trust and collective identity.

Future Strategy

From the process and intention of the ASEAN Community construction, the economy and culture move ahead to carry out security cooperation. The success of security cooperation will also maintain more economic and cultural cooperation, promote each other and continuously improve the level of cooperation. It can also be seen from the documents formulated and the cooperation carried out at present that the focus in the early stage is on the economy, and the focus in the latter stage is on social culture and political security, because the economy and social culture are the foundation. In turn, institutionalized political behavior can promote regional economic and cultural exchanges. In short, the relationship between the three communities is complimentary.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the previous analysis, the authors conclude that to build the ASEAN community, the following is needed:

The ASEAN should enhance the coordinated development of the ASCC, the APSC, and the AEC to improve the capability of collaborative cooperation. Consolidate regionalism with inclusiveness and allow for the open construction of regionalization. For example, the ASEAN established a joint working group and set up a humanitarian fund to effectively relieve the refugee crisis of the Rohingya people among the ASEAN members in 2015.

Build trust, collective identity, and regional identity among the member states based on the development of the AEC and the ASCC. Adopt comprehensive and people-centered strategies like education, participatory decision-making and institution building, cultural transmission, and others to improve inter-ASEAN people-to-people communication and boost people's pride and confidence in the ASEAN. For example, education and cultural transmission ought to emphasize the cultural and historical coherence amongst the ASEAN countries based on the broader SEA background.

Improve the "self-building" or self-developing capacity of Southeast Asian countries and rationally narrow the development gap. The ASEAN should actively use the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) platform to balance power rivalry. Before signing the RCEP, the ASEAN already had many ASEAB 10+1 FTAs with China, Japan, South Korea, etc. And there are many pairs of dialogue or trading partnerships among China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. By comparison, the RCEP has better service trade and more open investment conditions than the ASEAN 10+1 agreement. Hence, the RCEP will play the role of the economic and trading integrator in the region for reconciling and resolving the Spaghetti Bowl Effect, caused by complicated inter-regional bilateral trade agreements and various laws of different agreements. The formation of a unified law by the RCEP will reduce operating costs, precarity, and uncertainty. It differs from the ambitious EAFTA and CEPEA sweeping along the great powers' games. The ASEAN-led RCEP is the reconfirmation of the ASEAN Centrality. The RCEP is a benign platform for internal and external ASEAN. The RCEP implements regionalism with inclusiveness, but the Indo-Pacific Strategy regards China as a rival and excludes it from Indo-Pacific-related cooperation. Because the Indo-Pacific Strategy is essentially a strategy of the US and its allies, it is not good at getting rid of the zero-sum mentality and cold-war thinking. Therefore, it is

deprived of the opportunity to propose any novel and innovative institutional mechanism for promoting regional prosperity. The 2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific is proof of this (no innovative institutional mechanism to support the ASEAN Centrality in the Indo-Pacific) (Mueller, 2019). However, with the signing of the RCEP, the US allies such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and others chose open multilateralism rather than protectionism. They chose regionalism rather than nationalism. In terms of the antagonism with China, they prefer to cooperate and conduct solidarity rather than skepticism. These countries illustrated a clear signal to the world that economic regionalization and multilateral cooperation are the trends of globalization and recovery in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, on the one hand, the US is notably absent from the RCEP and the CPTPP, which over time are likely to strengthen intra-Asian integration around China (RCEP) and Japan (CPTPP) (Wu, 2019). On the other hand, unlike the anti-China Indo-Pacific, the RCEP does not exclude the US and insists on the concept of liberal economy and trade as well as multilateral cooperation to explore new development points for the depressed economic globalization.

Redefine the scope of the ASEAN Way's principle of "non-intervention" and conduct appropriate mediation if necessary. Carry out more multilateral cooperation based on the original bilateral cooperation. The ASEAN has an inherent dual function. First, the ASEAN exerts its leadership in coping with internal affairs and conflicts resolved in the ASEAN Way, intensifying the cooperation of the interregional states. Second, the ASEAN exerts its directing function in dealing with extra-regional international affairs by persisting in the ASEAN Centrality to face geopolitical and global economic reforms and pursue multilateral cooperation methods to resolve international disputes. For example, the ASEAN Centrality's influence would balance the powers' rivalry from the perspective of ASEAN's interests. The ASEAN's rational and inclusive attitude to the Indo-Pacific and China's Belt and Road Initiative is an excellent case.

When cooperating with big powers or jointly dealing with traditional and non-traditional issues, the ASEAN should maintain its independence and autonomy, abide by the ASEAN Centrality, and avoid losing initiative. In the case of Mekong regional issues, the ASEAN can actively participate in multilateral cooperation mechanisms, such as actively cooperating with the China-led Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), the US-led Mekong-US Partnership (MUSP), the ADB-invested Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) economic cooperation program, and so on.

REFERENCES

Acharya, A. (2014). *Constructing a security community in Southeast Asia* (1st ed., p. 91). New York, Routledge.

Aminuddin, M., & Purnomo, J. (2017). Redefining ASEAN Way: Assesing Normative Foundation on Inter-governmental Relationship in Southeast Asia. *Journal Of ASEAN Studies*, 5(1), p. 23. doi: 10.21512/jas.v5i1.962

Asian nations fail to reach agreement on South China Sea. (2012). Retrieved, from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18825148. Accessed 24 September 2021.

ASEAN Community Progress Monitoring System (ACPMS) (2017). Retrieved from: https://www.aseanstats.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/08/ACPMS_2017.pdf. Accessed 24 September 2021.

Giang, B., & Thanh, V. (2007). Approach to Development Gaps in ASEAN: A Vietnamese Perspective. *Asean Economic Bulletin*, 24(1), pp 164-180. doi: 10.1355/ae24-1i

Hamzani, A. (2020). The Trend to Counter Terrorism in ASEAN. *Journal Of Advanced Research In Dynamical And Control Systems*, 12(7), pp. 105-113. doi: 10.5373/jardcs/v12i7/20201990

Haosheng, D. (2020). *The relation between Zheng He and Islamic rising of Insular Southeast Asia.* Bangkok, Chulalongkorn University Press.

Haosheng, D. (2022, January). The Speculation on Islamic Terrorism. *International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research*, 7(1). doi: 10.46609/IJSSER.2022.v07i01.010 URL

Kuala Lumpur Declaration on The Establishment of The ASEAN Community. (2015). Retrieved from: https://asean.org/kuala-lumpur-declaration-on-the-establishment-of-the-asean-community/ Accessed 17 April 2022.

Moon, C., & You, C. (2017). The ASEAN Regional Forum's Experts and Eminent Persons Group: Achievements, Limitations, Prospects. *Global Governance: A Review Of Multilateralism And International Organizations*, 23(3), pp. 363-381. doi: 10.1163/19426720-02303003

Mueller, L. (2019). ASEAN centrality under threat – the cases of RCEP and connectivity. *Journal Of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 8(2), pp 177-198.

Our Communities. (2022). Retrieved 17 April 2022, from https://asean.org/our-communities/

Parameswaran, P. (2016). China, Not ASEAN, the Real Failure on South China Sea at Kunming Meeting. Retrieved from: https://the diplomat.com/2016/06/china-not-asean-the-real-failure-at-south-china-sea-kunming-meeting/https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/china-not-asean-the-real-failure-at-south-china-sea-kunming-meeting/. Accessed 24 September 2021.

Severino, R. (2007). The ASEAN Developmental Divide and the Initiative for ASEAN Integration. *Asean Economic Bulletin*, 24(1), pp. 35-44. doi: 10.1355/ae24-1c

Severino, R. (2007). *Southeast Asia in search of an ASEAN community* (1st ed., p. 316).Singapore: Inst. of Southeast Asian Studies.

Sullivan, D. (2021). ASEAN Has Failed on Myanmar. What's Next? Retrieved from: https://www.justsecurity.org/78772/asean-has-failed-on-myanmar-whats-next/. Accessed 17 April 2022.

Ting, W. (2017). Increasing Economic Interdependence between China and ASEAN and Its Implications. *JAS (Journal Of ASEAN Studies)*, 4(2), p. 127. doi: 10.21512/jas.v4i2.1524

UN help sought over temple row. (2008). Retrieved from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7518741.stm. Accessed 24 September 2021.

Wu, C. (2019). ASEAN at the Crossroads: Trap and Track between CPTPP and RCEP. *Journal Of International Economic Law*, 23(1), pp. 97-117.

Wang, X. (2018). *The Theory of Peripherals Development: World System and the Development of Southeast Asia* (2nd ed., p. 281). Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House.

Wang, Y. (2000). The Asian Financial Crisis and Its Aftermath: Do We Need a Regional Financial Arrangement?. *Asean Economic Bulletin*, 17(2), pp. 205-217. doi: 10.1355/ae17-2h