

**(Working Title) The Making of a Regional institution: Southeast Asia and Major Powers**

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*Abstract*

*Regional interaction and regionalism in Southeast Asia have traditionally been characterised by external powers. Since its inception in 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have traditionally welcomed great powers into the region to uphold regional security. ASEAN cannot manage its regional affairs alone without enhanced interactions with its broader regional counterparts. The proliferation of ASEAN-led frameworks is the manifestation of this. At the same time, as an institution that is comprised of middle powers and small states, ASEAN is prone to the external intervention of major powers. A win-win situation would be where both the external powers and ASEAN could peacefully co-exist, and each have their respective agenda working within the ASEAN frameworks. This paper discusses ASEAN's relations with major powers, and how their interaction shapes the building of a regional institution. This paper will be arranged in two parts of analysis. The first is the analysis of regional institutions as a manifestation of small-middle power diplomacy in the midst of great power politics. The second part is on the influence of major powers on regional institutions. The analyses are then complemented by a case study on the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus, to assess the interaction between ASEAN member countries and the external powers.*

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## *Introduction*

Regional interaction and regionalism in Southeast Asia have traditionally been characterised by external powers. The Cold War was a period of intense conflict across Southeast Asia, while the consolidation of postcolonial regimes occurred. The “domino theory” and fear of communism inscribed by the West were followed by external powers seeking to establish stable governments who could resist communism, while at the same time the communist bloc likewise supported governments with a revolutionary drive to establish party-states intent on communist development.

On 8 August 1967, five leaders – the Foreign Ministers of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand – met in Bangkok, Thailand and signed a document, which manifested the birth of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). These countries sought to create a common front against the spread of communism and promote political, economic, and social stability amid rising tensions in the Asia-Pacific. In 1976, the members signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, which emphasizes mutual respect and noninterference in other countries’ affairs.

It is apparent that relations with external powers, in addition to regional security and stability, gave way to the founding of ASEAN. In the early years, great power politics pushed the original ASEAN-5 to working together and forming a solid cooperation on essential issues as they sought to ward off a common threat of communism, and since then, ASEAN has sought to mediate Great Power relations.

In its path towards a more inclusive Southeast Asia, a number of Great Power events contribute to shape it, including the US-China rapprochement in 1971 and the end of Cold War-era political structure (Acharya, 2017; Mahbubani and Nair, 2017). After the Cold War, new challenges face the region, while at the same time internal ASEAN relations grew to be more complex with a larger and more diverse membership. Since the 1990’s, ASEAN has hailed success in convening major powers in the region, despite tensions among them and despite relatively lack of material power. In 21st century, great power dynamics and US-China rivalry present the greatest task for ASEAN in managing its great power relations.

ASEAN cannot manage its regional affairs alone without enhanced interactions with its broader regional counterparts. The ASEAN Charter acknowledges this, by clearly stipulating that non-ASEAN states can engage ASEAN through the extensive external relations that ASEAN has developed over the decades. Though not expanding formally, ASEAN nevertheless establishes special frameworks for interaction with important extraregional players. The proliferation of ASEAN-led frameworks is the manifestation of this, and are these frameworks are now central to establishing venues for dialogue.

How should ASEAN manage its relations with great powers? An ideal situation would be where both the external powers and ASEAN could peacefully co-exist and mutually benefit from the cooperation. Nonetheless, as an institution that is comprised of middle powers and small states, ASEAN is prone to the external intervention of major powers.

This paper discusses ASEAN's relations with major powers, and how their interaction shapes the building of a regional institution. This paper will be arranged in two parts of analysis. The first is the analysis of regional institutions as a manifestation of small-middle power diplomacy in the midst of great power politics. The second part is on the influence of major powers on regional institutions. The analyses are then complemented by a case study on the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus, to assess the interaction between ASEAN Member Countries and the Dialogue Partners in the ADMM Plus mechanism.

### *Regional Institutions and Small-Middle Power Diplomacy*

What are regional institutions? Regionalism has generally been understood as cooperation and integration within a region through multilateral channel. Today, however, the concept of regionalism continues to evolve, with regions and regionalism taking a quasi-autonomous role in shaping global policies and in addressing several issues and areas previously tackled in the framework of global multilateral institutions (Barbieri, 2019). Moreover, since turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is now great deal of diversity of regional institutions. Acharya and Johnston (2007) gave an example of Europe, which not only exhibits the highest institutional density in terms of the number of overlapping regional mechanisms, but individual European regional groupings also tend to be more heavily institutionalized and intrusive, especially in terms of their approach to issues that affect state sovereignty (such as human rights). On the other hand, Asian institutions, including ASEAN, have claimed uniqueness in terms of their decision-making norms and approach to socialization, but many have questioned their effectiveness in managing security dilemmas and the economic vulnerabilities of their members.

There are plenty of academic discussion on small and middle powers. Small and middle powers have different foreign policy alternatives compared to great powers. Limited in hard power, one common policy option for small and middle power is gathering fellow smaller regional countries to agree upon one collective voice in dealing with greater powers. A key feature of the diplomacies of middle powers is the promotion of international policy tasks through multilateralism. ASEAN is arguably one of the most fitting case of small and middle power diplomacy. In addition to the promotion of multilateralism, I have argued that strategies to invite other great powers to rebalance the presence of the existing great powers, and extensively binding all great powers with regional instruments and mechanisms allow ASEAN to continue to strive in the midst of great power politics through banding together in a regional institution (Muhibat, 2019).

As we go deep into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and after a year of the global struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic, it is apparent that small and middle power diplomacy is met by strong challenges. Middle powers are expected to be skilled at inventing new institutional arrangements and brokering the overlapping interests of parties concerned with a particular issue (Young, 1989), which turns out to be difficult in the absence of influence in the international system. For small and middle powers to take the lead in the multilateral arena, it also depends on the 'invitation' and 'acknowledgement' of the major powers.

For ASEAN, the concern is not only the great powers (United States and China) and their influence on ASEAN's institutional building, but also to all ASEAN's external partners, such as Japan, South

Korea, and Russia. The ASEAN Charter stipulates that non-ASEAN states can engage ASEAN through the extensive external relations that ASEAN has developed over the decades. Though not expanding formally, ASEAN nevertheless establishes special frameworks for interaction with important extraregional players. ASEAN now has 10 Dialogue Partners, namely Australia, Canada, China, European Union, India, Japan, Republic of Korea, New Zealand, Russia, and the United States.

*The influence of external (major) powers on regional institutions*

In ASEAN's case, 'acknowledgement' of the major powers matter a lot in carrying out its activities, in particular in the exercise of convening all relevant stakeholders in the region. ASEAN's success in convening external powers is what is known as the 'ASEAN Centrality.' Various scholars have tried to define, both explicitly and implicitly, the meaning of ASEAN Centrality. Lee Jones (2010) for example, uses the term "ASEAN leadership" when referring to ASEAN ability to influence both sub-regional and extra-regional events. Richard Stubbs (2014) also refers to term "leadership" to describe how ASEAN works to facilitate problem solving of regional issues, establish mechanism for regional consultation, and shaping the way how regional issues are discussed.

At the empirical level, ASEAN Centrality is best illustrated by the existence of the various ASEAN-led institutions involving external powers. Among these are the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the ASEAN Plus Three, the East Asia Summit (EAS), and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus. The central institutional and regional role played by ASEAN, as proven with the existence of these mechanism, has invited some interests of many extra-regional powers to formalize relations with ASEAN in the form of ASEAN+1 mechanism as the way ASEAN describes and manages its external relations.

Does ASEAN really have such convening power? There are many criticisms towards ASEAN centrality, in particular when it comes to dealing with an external power at the back of a dispute. The South China Sea dispute is the best example for this. Is ASEAN centrality merely a concept?

Acharya (2017) debunks the misinterpretations surrounding the concept of 'ASEAN Centrality.' Contrary to the popular belief, Acharya discusses the indispensable role of external actors—rather than ASEAN member states themselves—on translating such concept into the real policy practice. ASEAN Centrality posits the organization as the core of Asia-Pacific regional institutions. Outcome from the concept, especially ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Plus Three, and East ASEAN Summit, provide an indispensable platform in which major powers conduct their relations and hence, getting the long-term benefit from. This existence of ASEAN's normative feature is a prerequisite condition for the establishment of security framework and other post-Cold War multilateral institutions in Asia-Pacific.

Small and middle powers need an open, rules-based world to flourish. Hence, the biggest challenge now with the ever increasing great power rivalry between the United States and China is that small and middle powers have the most to lose from this transition away from a 'rules-based' to a 'power-based' order. Great power competition brings us closer to a world in which military power and economic size dictate the terms of engagement, which creates a disadvantage to small and

middle powers. For ASEAN, the challenge is in making sure such ‘acknowledgement’ of ASEAN as a convening power remains.

Current competitions bring detrimental effects to the institutions, including ASEAN. China’s growing economy lures away countries like Laos and Cambodia to make a compromise by taking sides with China, and China’s expanding vision in the region also poses a threat by establishing new initiatives such as AIIB and BRI which ASEAN do not have a significant role to control their direction. The disagreement in 2012 under Laos chairmanship became the unprecedented event when the organization failed to issue a joint communique and signaled a deteriorating cohesion caused by external actor. Tay (2019) argues that ASEAN’s ‘external’ leadership is under threat, as contentious issues and competitive pressures are rising in the region today and there are rising expectations to move beyond diplomatic discussion aimed at building trust, towards action or, at least, to bring greater focus and candour to deliberations on the most sensitive issues.

Rules and international stability allow countries regardless of size to compete on an even footing, and when rules and norms are no longer consistently upheld and adhered to, countries are made more vulnerable to ‘grey zone’ coercion by larger neighbours who feel less inhibited to exploit their economic or military asymmetries for geopolitical gain (Lemahieu, 2020). Regional institutions like ASEAN depend on rules and norms being adhered to.

Great power rivalry impacts Southeast Asia and ASEAN to a degree that ASEAN’s unity, not only centrality, is challenged. Kishore and Nair (2017) highlighted the indispensability of ASEAN’s neutrality in the midst of US-China rivalry. They argue that ASEAN’s architecture is currently under threat, as great powers try to instrumentalize ASEAN to project their own interest, especially towards the on-going South China Sea dispute. Paradoxically, such an approach will give disadvantage for both the US or China. Only an independent and well-functioning ASEAN will serve long-term benefit for the competing major powers. Neutrality that ASEAN enshrined in its principles serves an indispensable role in providing a platform where major powers can engage with lesser suspicions.

During the Cold War, ‘neutrality’ for ASEAN was translated to autonomy that kept the major powers at bay and minimizing their interference towards Southeast Asian countries. The ‘neutrality’ enshrined in ZOPFAN suggested that greater autonomy was still the main premise. Emmers (2018) explains how the aim to limit the influence of major powers gradually shifted in the early 2000s, as multipolar structure and other major players such as China, Japan, and India have shifted ASEAN’s priority from autonomy to impartiality. That shift materialized into a more inclusive approach towards major Asia-Pacific countries, particularly by building regional architecture that overlaps multilateral bodies, such as East Asia Summit, ASEAN +3, and ASEAN Regional Forum.

#### *Case Study: ADMM Plus*

The ADMM and ADMM-Plus have often been hailed as the prime multilateral defence and security mechanism in the region, in particular through comparison with the ARF, which had long been met with dissatisfaction due to insufficiently addressing important security issues. The ADMM and ADMM-Plus frameworks offer responses to some of the political and functional

deficiencies of ARF — the ADMM is explicitly tied to ASEAN’s pursuit of an ASEAN Political–Security Community, while the ADMM-Plus, may be viewed as reflective of heightened questions about the insufficiency of ASEAN and the ARF in responding to both the challenges of major power uncertainty and pressing nontraditional security challenges (Ba, 2019)

Tan (2020) suggests that ADMM-Plus has superseded previous defence and security mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). This section of the paper assesses the interaction between ASEAN Member Countries and the Dialogue Partners in the ADMM-Plus mechanism, to find out how the ADMM-Plus has impacted the region in the area of defence and security in the region. Outlining the history and programmes of the ADMM-Plus is necessary in properly contextualising the trajectory and impact of the ADMM-Plus.

The ADMM-Plus was inaugurated in October, 2010 in Hanoi following the ADMM’s ratification of papers endorsing the ADMM-Plus. Composed of the ten ASEAN Member States and Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, and the United States (the so-called ‘Plus States’), it serves as a “Mechanism for multilateral security dialogue and consultation as well as a framework for non-traditional security cooperation” (Tan, 2017). Initially a triennial arrangement when established in 2010, it became a biennial arrangement in 2013 following the Sixth ADMM, before ultimately becoming an annual arrangement in 2018 following the ADMM Retreat in Singapore.

The ADMM-Plus became the first multilateral mechanism in East Asia that allowed relevant military officials to regularly partake in dialogues and to spearhead regional defence and security cooperation. Prior to the ADMM-Plus, regional military officials only really held ad-hoc dialogues with one another, with regional defence and security cooperation being led by Foreign Ministry officials – thus, military officials had to fall in line with the regional defence and security agenda of Foreign Ministry officials.

As mentioned, ADMM is generally viewed in a positive manner when compared to previous efforts like ARF, where previous regional defence and security mechanisms focused solely on promoting dialogue, hence the common criticism of ASEAN as merely a ‘talk shop’ with little in the way of substance. ADMM-Plus sought to do exactly the opposite of that, which is being practical and building workable platform for the militaries to engage each other. As such, the ADMM-Plus created Expert Working Groups (EWGs) for each of the ADMM-Plus’s areas of collaboration which include: maritime security; humanitarian and disaster management; counterterrorism; military medicine; peacekeeping operations; humanitarian mine action; and cybersecurity. EWGs are essentially where ‘[programmes] are incubated, sharpened and proposed for approval at higher levels’ (Pitakdumrongkit & Klaisringoen, 2019: P.70). As a testament to the ADMM-Plus’ focus on practicality, between 2011-2017, 50 EWG planning sessions and/or table-top exercises were held. Additionally, under the planning of the different EWG, the ADMM-Plus hosted six joint military exercises. The largest of these military exercises - a combined maritime security and counterterrorism exercise held in Brunei and Singapore in May, 2016 - involved 3,500 personnel, 18 naval vessels, 25 aircraft, and 40 Special Forces Teams.

To really understand the potential the ADMM-Plus and its EWGs have in terms of regional defence and security cooperation programmes, one must only look at the achievements of the EWG on

military medicine (MM). Under the first pair of Co-Chairs - Singapore and Japan (2011 - 2013) - the EWG was able to establish points of contact in each ASEAN Member State (AMS), create an inventory of each AMS' medical support capabilities, drafted the SOP for Joint and Combined Medical Operations, and organise the Joint Humanitarian Assistance/Military Medicine (HADR/MM) exercise held in June of 2013 in Brunei. Under the second pair of Co-Chairs - Thailand and Russia (2014 - 2016) - the EWG was able to draft the Concept Paper on the Establishment of the ASEAN Center of Military Medicine (ACMM) which details the scope, responsibilities, and functions of the ACMM, have it endorsed at the 9th ADMM in March, 2015, and ultimately launch the ACMM itself in April, 2016 in Bangkok.

This greater willingness to work with one another is due to the separation of the ADMM and ADMM-Plus. Tan (2020) argues that, historically, AMS have been reluctant to cooperate with states outside of the ASEAN framework due to a fear of states outside of the ASEAN frameworks' overt interference in the region. Therefore, the ADMM serves as the mechanism where AMS can collaborate with one another on more substantive defence matters whereas the ADMM Plus becomes a means for AMS to learn from Plus States and a means for Plus States to have a stake in the region.

Furthermore, having the EWGs be based around non-traditional security issues helps limit the possibility of AMS and Plus States conflicting on 'realpolitik issues' and helps centre the mechanisms' activities around areas of mutual cooperation (Tang, 2016). In addition, the fact that each EWG is co-chaired by an AMS and a Plus State allows for even greater cooperation and capacity building efforts between AMS and Plus States which is especially important for states with limited bilateral military-to-military cooperation mechanisms. Ideally, as suggested by Tang (2016), allowing Plus States the opportunity to actively lead an EWG, in addition to allowing Plus States' to have a certain sense of ownership when it comes to ADMM-Plus activities, can help to strengthen Plus States' commitments to the region and the region's overall stability whilst simultaneously cementing ASEAN Centrality in regional defence and security mechanisms.

The maintenance of ASEAN Centrality has become increasingly important amidst heightened competition between major powers. Pitakdumrongkit & Klaisringoen (2019) argue that ADMM-Plus is a sign of "continued ASEAN Centrality in the region. They view that the ADMM-Plus, a mechanism wherein member states outside of ASEAN have to have a track record of respecting ASEAN Centrality in order to be admitted into the mechanism, has become the lynchpin of ASEAN's hedging strategy in managing US-China competition. This is an overly positive assessment of ADMM-Plus, because there are plenty of criticisms to it as well. Nonetheless, ADMM-Plus depicts a picture of how external powers interact with ASEAN and within the ASEAN frameworks, and the manner of which some may try to insert their agenda into the workings of ASEAN. At the same time, it also depicts ASEAN's convening power not only on economic and development issues, but also on the more sensitive topics of defence and security.

There are criticisms directed towards whether ADMM-Plus has been effective. We have witnessed challenges, mainly centred around the issue of the South China Sea. Disagreements led to the abandonment of the planned (but non-mandatory) Joint Statement on the South China Sea in 2015. Interestingly, Tan (2017) noted that this 'failure' showcased the ten ASEAN member countries - including the claimant states Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam - banding together to

have the South China Sea included in the Joint Declaration; which could be seen as another sign of greater ASEAN Centrality fostered by the ADMM-Plus.

Moreover, Ba (2019) also highlights the downside of having divergent interests of ASEAN's extra-regional audience, and the fact that that ASEAN's role and centrality might be more easily eclipsed or weakened in frameworks like the ADMM-Plus where the emphasis on military and logistical capacity, as well as the smaller size of the forum, gives larger states greater significance. Efforts to substantiate ASEAN centrality through the ADMM-Plus' design and mandate offer some ways to respond to that concern.

More states, such as Canada, France, and the EU, have shown interest in joining the ADMM-Plus for various reasons, but mainly because of the aforementioned achievements, i.e the mechanism's ability to allow for greater involvement in the region, the practical benefits and activities offered, and its ability to allow states the opportunity to more consistently interact and carry out dialogue with the region's major powers. Challenges remain for ADMM-Plus and ASEAN's convening power. Great power competition would continue to be a big issue that may overwhelm the region.

*Conclusion: Asserting leadership in regional institution*

External powers have played a part in further institutionalization of ASEAN as a regional organisation and ASEAN as the central driver of broader regional architecture centred on ASEAN mechanism. With the challenges in maintaining centrality in the midst of regional dynamics and geopolitical rivalry, questions arise regarding whether external partner engagement is a positive or negative contribution to maintaining ASEAN centrality.

Small and middle power diplomacy should not mean choosing between the U.S. and China, something that most small and middle powers cannot do and prefer not to do anyhow. The main question is, then, how can ASEAN make sure that the major powers' influence to ASEAN is positive towards its efforts to strengthen itself regional institution. In this regard, ASEAN must assert leadership in ASEAN, which should include setting up the agenda and not only convening meetings.

A more effective and coherent ASEAN grouping is a prerequisite to asserting leadership. The reality, however, is that ASEAN's unity is jeopardy, and this might be the impact of major power influence. On the back of such reality, the chance of ASEAN asserting leadership seems unlikely. A more realistic take on this is for ASEAN to assert leadership on some issues. As nicely put by Stubbs (2014), while ASEAN has been the leader in East Asian institution-building, the Association and its members should not automatically be expected to play a leadership role on all issues preoccupying the region. ASEAN's external partners, including the major powers, will continue to seek to insert their agenda into ASEAN, or at least put priorities on only ASEAN agenda that suit their interest. ASEAN's best bet is to play this condition to its benefit.



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