

**POLICY BRIEF****ASEAN CENTRALITY IN THE REGIONAL ARCHITECTURE**

January 2015

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Asia's strategic landscape is rapidly changing. Tensions run considerably higher, and are fed by competing territorial claims as well as historic and ongoing differences between China and Japan. Questions have also been raised about the effects of the United States' influence in the region.

The need to articulate and maintain ASEAN centrality faces mounting pressures against such a political-security backdrop. There are also concerns on whether ASEAN can adapt and cope as major powers become more assertive and active in the region.

The SIIA argues that ASEAN centrality can and should be maintained, as well as further developed into the middle term. ASEAN must continue to develop its own consensus on key issues and act successfully as a central actor and influencer of events among others in Asia. This would benefit both ASEAN member states and the region.

Towards this goal, this policy brief makes, in summary, the following recommendations:

1. ASEAN should seek to maintain and develop the current multiplex and inclusive regional architecture, rather than seek to subordinate this to a single system.
2. While the multiplex is maintained, the East Asia Summit needs to be revised and repositioned as an apex platform for engagement among the key stakeholders.

3. ASEAN should monitor non-ASEAN Summits and fora, and seek to engage or develop real but flexible relationships with such meetings in terms of agenda and actors.

4. ASEAN should work towards enhancing its unity and common voice on key regional and global issues.

5. ASEAN Post-2015 Community should aim for a more advanced phase of regionalism and intra-ASEAN integration to support ASEAN centrality.

**INTRODUCTION: REVIEWING ASEAN'S AMBITIONS FOR CENTRALITY**

Longstanding concerns about the stability of Asia have sharpened since the global financial crisis. Questions have arisen about the US' political awareness, will and capacity to support its Asia pivot. The rise of China, evident since the 1990s, has come even more into focus and triggered alarm, especially over differences emerging between Beijing and neighbours over territorial claims and other issues.

Amidst these rising concerns, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) occupies an important role in the regional fora and institution-building. Recognition has grown both within ASEAN and from outsiders that the group has helped to create institutions and processes that allow members and

neighbours in the wider region to deal with problems peacefully.

This has led to claims that ASEAN has established itself as the “core of regionalism in East Asia and the Asia Pacific”<sup>1</sup>.

ASEAN’s role in achieving “stability in the region without the overt need for hegemony” has also assured its member states and partners of its benign role and commitment to the principle of non-interference with another’s domestic affairs<sup>2</sup>.

This role has been earlier termed “the driver’s seat”, to recognise that the group serves in ways that no major or medium Asian power has been able to. But critics doubt whether the 10 middle and smaller states will be able to truly *drive* the process forward, especially when major powers are hesitant and, recently, increasingly suspicious of each other.

Today, the term “ASEAN centrality” is preferred. This concept has been variously defined (see Box). The SIIA sees ASEAN centrality as a concept that maintains the group’s legitimacy and credibility, which further enhances its capacity to play a leading role in determining the agenda for the broader region. This means developing consensus on key issues, helping to initiate and coordinate collective action, and to serve as the key hub connecting all major powers in the region.

These are considerable ambitions. The idea of “centrality” tacitly recognises that others can be “drivers” or “driving forces” for Asia, whether for better or worse. Therefore, articulating the need for ASEAN centrality and maintaining it, also faces mounting pressures in a fast-changing political-security setting. There are also concerns whether ASEAN can

adapt and cope as major powers become more assertive and active in the region.

### DEFINING AND ARTICULATING CENTRALITY

Some suggest that ASEAN must articulate more clearly to its external partners the idea of ASEAN centrality<sup>3</sup>. But defining the concept requires a clear consensus among ASEAN member states<sup>4</sup>. Different definitions of ASEAN centrality have been given, some with varying emphases.

In 2011, the then ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan said: “ASEAN has been very good at providing the centrality of goodwill...it is time for ASEAN to provide the *centrality of substance*”<sup>5</sup>. (Emphasis added).

Among academic observers, ASEAN centrality has been defined by its growing leadership role in Asia’s regional architecture, and by its role as the main node in dense and overlapping regional networks connecting multiple stakeholders in the region<sup>6</sup>. It also includes the ability to influence events and decisions<sup>7</sup>, and to “mobilise collective resources, energies and wills”<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Severino, C. Rodolfo (2007) ASEAN Beyond Forty: Towards Political and Economic Integration, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 29, No. 3 pp. 406-423.

<sup>2</sup> Amador III, Julio Santiago (2010) ASEAN in the Asia Pacific: Central or Peripheral, *Asian Politics & Policy*, Vol. 2, Issue. 4, pp. 601-616.

<sup>3</sup> ASEAN-ROK Forum – Positive roles of ASEAN and ROK as middle powers for an East Asian Community, 27 to 28 November 2014, Yangon.

<sup>4</sup> Jones, Lee (2010) Still in the Driver’s Seat, but for how long? ASEAN’s capacity for leadership in East Asian international relations, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 20, No. 3, pp. 95-113.

<sup>5</sup> Malminderjit Singh (2011) Asean must do more to boost competitiveness: Surin, *Business Times*, 2 June 2011, Available: [http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/aci/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2013/04/20110602\\_ACR\\_Laun ch-Business\\_Times.pdf](http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/aci/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2013/04/20110602_ACR_Laun ch-Business_Times.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Caballero-Anthony, Mely (2014) Understanding ASEAN’s centrality: bases and prospects in an evolving regional architecture, *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 27, No. 4, pp. 563-584.

<sup>7</sup> Jones, Lee (2010) Still in the Driver’s Seat, but for how long? ASEAN’s capacity for leadership in East Asian international relations, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 20, No. 3, pp. 95-113.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

ASEAN's role in the wider region has been institutionalised in the ASEAN Charter, to serve as one of the guiding purpose and principles of the Association<sup>9</sup>. One of ASEAN's main purposes is: *"To maintain the centrality and proactive role of ASEAN as the primary driving force in its relations and cooperation with its external partners in a regional architecture that is open, transparent and inclusive."*<sup>10</sup>

Further, the Charter calls on ASEAN and its Member states to maintain as one of its principles: *"the centrality of ASEAN in external political, economic, social and cultural relations while remaining actively engaged, outward-looking, inclusive and non-discriminatory"*.<sup>11</sup>

Even if ASEAN wishes to take on this role, it remains an open question whether it *can*. There are questions of weak capacity, especially given the group's lack of heft in security and economics, when compared to the major powers of the region.

**ASEAN centrality depends on an external factor - the acceptance of major powers to legitimise ASEAN's central role in Asia's regional architecture.**

ASEAN's efforts to take up a central role is assisted by instances when ASEAN has stood united to set aside narrower national interests for the regional public good. Conversely, ASEAN centrality can and has been undermined by internal weaknesses in the group, and the overemphasis by member states on sovereignty and state-centeredness<sup>12</sup>. This has, at times, resulted in

a lack of unity and effective leadership on tackling regional challenges.

While the decisions that ASEAN makes internally will matter, much depends on factors outside ASEAN's control.

Ultimately, ASEAN centrality depends on an external factor - the acceptance among the major powers to legitimise ASEAN's central role in Asia's regional architecture.

This too is in flux. In the past, while trust among the major powers was low, there seemed to be less immediate dangers of uncontrolled flare-ups. The regional order was far from settled but, undergirded by the US security presence, did not seem unstable. ASEAN could serve as the hub in such a situation not because of its strength, resolve or speed to address urgent and key problems. Rather, ASEAN was trusted (or at least not subject to strong distrust) to manage things in a way that was acceptable to all. In this sense, ASEAN first assumed a key status more because of a default in trust among the major powers, rather than intrinsic factors and strengths.

Today's regional conditions differ. Tensions run considerably higher, with competing territorial claims as well as historic and ongoing differences between China and Japan threatening to tip over the region's equilibrium of peace. An atmosphere of rising tensions would pressure ASEAN's effectiveness to respond effectively and quickly to key issues. Already, questions have also been raised about ASEAN's ability, given its own limited capacity and institutional constraints<sup>13</sup>.

On the other hand, there are emerging demands to develop more substantive major power relationships - especially between the

<sup>9</sup> ASEAN Charter (2007)

<sup>10</sup> ASEAN Charter (2007) Article 1; No. 15

<sup>11</sup> ASEAN Charter (2007) Article 2: No. 1(m)

<sup>12</sup> Amador III, Julio Santiago (2010) ASEAN in the Asia Pacific: Central or Peripheral, *Asian Politics & Policy*, Vol. 2, Issue. 4, pp. 601-616.

<sup>13</sup> Caballero-Anthony, Mely (2014) Understanding ASEAN's centrality: bases and prospects in an evolving regional architecture, *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 27, No. 4, pp. 563-584.

US and China, as the current and rising super powers – so as to come to a better understanding of their relationship and respective roles in Asia. If a condominium or concert is agreed among the major powers, such a settlement would create a new regional architecture in which ASEAN might well become a periphery actor.

**ASEAN must aim to continue developing its own consensus on key issues and act as a central actor and influencer of events among others in Asia.**

For this paper, we argue that ASEAN centrality can and should not only be maintained but further developed into the middle term. By this we mean that ASEAN must aim to continue developing its own consensus on key issues and act successfully as a central actor and influencer of events among others in Asia. This would, in our view, be good not only for ASEAN member states but also for the region.

To do so will require ASEAN to evolve a number of its current practices and processes. One key to this is to maintain and develop the ability of all ten ASEAN member states to speak with a common voice, which will result in a coordinated, cohesive and coherent position on issues of concern to the region and even at the global level. ASEAN centrality, in this regard, enables the group to act as the core pillar of peace, security and stability holding the regional architecture together.

Another, and different need, is for ASEAN to engage with key stakeholders, and to find the wisdom and pragmatism to adjust ASEAN's positions and processes to accommodate them. This will be challenging but needed when one or more major powers disagree with one another.

The first section discusses regional developments, as well the attempts by both major and middle powers to influence the region. It also highlights the need for ASEAN-led institutions to step up, in order to ensure

their relevance in Asia's regional architecture. In the second section, recommendations are made on how ASEAN can exercise its centrality for the benefit of the wider region, and to strengthen the group's unity. The third and final section concludes with how ASEAN must find and assert its right to shape the region's future or risk becoming sidelined in the regional architecture.

## 1. CHANGES AND CONTINUITY

Asia's strategic landscape is rapidly changing with the rise of China coupled with a reawakened Japan. There are also growing questions about the effectiveness of US influence in the region, especially looking further forward into the future<sup>14</sup>.

ASEAN recognised this from the 1990s and, in the wake of the regional crisis of 1997-98, sought to engage its neighbours – none more so than China. Beijing in this period was focused on economic development and gaining acceptance in the region. It was also during this time that the ASEAN-China relationship developed rapidly on all fronts.

In many ways, engaging China in the regional context was a motivating factor behind many ASEAN-initiated multilateral forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), and later the East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meeting (ADMM). This formed overlapping concentric layers within the regional architecture with ASEAN as the centre.

ASEAN's "concentric multi-layered institutions centring on ASEAN's centrality as a neutral platform for major powers to meet" continues to be relevant and necessary.<sup>15</sup> But given the

<sup>14</sup> Bisley, Nick (2012) China's rise and the making of East Asia's security architecture, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 21(73) pp. 19-34.

<sup>15</sup> Seng Chye, Tan (2012) Changing global landscape and enhanced US engagement with Asia – challenges and emerging trends, *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 19, No.1, pp. 108-129.

new power dynamics between major and rising powers, the region might be entering a “new hybrid system of order”<sup>16</sup>.

The formation of a hybrid system of order relates, in part, to America’s long standing “hub-and-spokes” alliance system in the Asia-Pacific. These bilateral security alliances were established after the Second World War to prevent a larger regional war by “potential rogue allies in Asia with...unpredictable authoritarian leaders”. During the Cold War, they also served to prevent the “domino effect” of countries in the region falling to communism<sup>17</sup>.

**Some fear that the US alliance system could be making the region less rather than more stable and could push the region into an unwanted and unexpected conflict.**

### 1.1 America’s Alliances

Today, the US-led alliances continue and are being re-emphasised. This has been driven by concerns that arise from conflicting territorial claims at sea. The Obama administration has re-committed and reassured its existing bilateral security alliances with countries in the region, especially with the Philippines, Australia, and Japan<sup>18</sup>. Outreach to non-allies such as Malaysia and Vietnam has also increased.

From the Chinese perspective, many see the American recommitment as a containment strategy specifically targeted against the country’s rise and regional leadership. This

<sup>16</sup> Bisley, Nick (2012) China’s rise and the making of East Asia’s security architecture, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 21(73) pp. 19-34.

<sup>17</sup> Cha, Victor D. (2010) Powerplay origins of the US alliance system in Asia, *International Security*, Vol. 34, No.3, pp. 158-196.

<sup>18</sup> (2014) US forming new security alliance in Asia-Pacific, *The Philippine Star*, 25 May 2014, [Online], Available: <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2014/05/25/1327015/us-forming-new-security-alliance-asia-pacific> Retrieved: 9 December 2014.

has led to a growing fear that given these perceptions, the US alliance system could be “making the region less rather than more stable” and could “push the region into an unwanted and unexpected conflict”<sup>19</sup>.

### 1.2 Japan’s new political-security diplomacy

Another factor impacting the region is the foreign and security policy of Japan, shaped by shifts in the country’s domestic policies. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his party have promised to restore Japan to its former strength, not only by reawakening its long dormant economy, but also expanding its roles in politics and security.

During a speech in Washington DC in February 2013, Abe declared that “Japan was back”. His rhetoric was seen as a signal of Japan’s “intention to pursue a more proactive and visible role in ... global affairs”<sup>20</sup>.

The combination of a nationalistic, assertive Japanese leader, and the politicisation of Japan’s territorial claims in the East China Sea, has caused Tokyo’s bilateral relations between Beijing and Seoul to deteriorate.

PM Abe finally met with China’s President Xi at the end of 2014, but this was a brief and reluctant one after much prodding on both sides. The meeting might have set something of a baseline for relations between the two Asian giants, and signs indicate that some cooperation on economic and financial issues may be restarted.

But a number of fundamental issues will continue to inhibit efforts to warm up relations between the two countries. This is especially as Japan reasserts itself and coincides with China’s own efforts to grow its role and reach across the region.

<sup>19</sup> Beeson, Mark (2014) Can Asia’s alliances still keep the peace?, *Global Asia*, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 100-106.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, Sheila A. (2014) Japan’s new politics and the US-Japan alliance, *Council on Foreign Relations*, July 2014.



For instance, Japan is seeking to assert its influence not only on bilateral issues with China but to also play a larger role in the South China Sea. The Japanese are providing coast guard training and patrol vessels to ASEAN member countries, as well as pledging to support the capacity of ASEAN countries in safeguarding the seas<sup>21</sup>. It has since provided 10 new patrol vessels to the Philippine Coast Guard, three to Indonesia, with more likely provided to Vietnam as well.

**The simultaneous rise of both Japan and China will have significant implications on Asia's power order.**

Abe is also employing the use of economic, financial and trade diplomacy to support Japan's political-security re-emergence in the region. Japan has doled out economic and development assistance, as well as negotiated a multitude of trade agreements. On the domestic front, Abe's economic policy reform programme "Abenomics", seeks to stimulate growth for the Japanese economy. Together, Japan hopes to change international perceptions about Japan's decline as an economic power and pillar of financial stability in the region.

The simultaneous rise of both Japan and China will have significant implications for the power order in Asia. A collision is not inevitable and hopefully, the Sino-Japanese rivalries can be managed, given their economic interdependence. But many believe that trends are making the "maintenance of regional stability much more complex than it has been for the past 30 years"<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> Abe, Shinzo (2014) 'Keynote Address', Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan, presented at the 13<sup>th</sup> IISS Asia Security Summit *The Shangri-La Dialogue*, Singapore, 30 May.

<sup>22</sup> Bisley, Nick (2012) China's rise and the making of East Asia's security architecture, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 21(73) pp. 19-34.

### 1.3 Jostling to Set the Agenda

In response to emerging tensions, both major and middle powers have been jostling to set the regional agenda. Whether these efforts will have positive effects on the region remains to be seen. But one danger is that where major and middle powers set the agenda, this could result in a diminution in ASEAN centrality and influence.

An example of this was when Japan's PM Abe urged the ASEAN-hosted EAS to take up regional politics and security as its agenda, with a specific proposal that countries adopt a disclosure framework of their military budgets. The Japanese PM also added that the US-Japan alliance would form the cornerstone for regional peace and security, and efforts for trilateral cooperation with "like-minded partners" such as Australia and India would be strengthened.

**Where major and middle powers set the agenda, ASEAN centrality and influence could weaken.**

Intentionally or otherwise, if Abe succeeds in moving the agenda towards this direction, there are good reasons to surmise that this would undercut ASEAN centrality, rather than reinforce it. Japan is moreover, not the only one attempting to set the regional agenda.

During South Korean President Park Geun-hye's address to the Joint Session of the US Congress in May 2013, she noted the problem of "Asia's Paradox", where political and security cooperation has not grown in tandem with economic interdependence in Asia. In order to build trust in Northeast Asia, South Korea proposed a multilateral initiative for peace and cooperation – The Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI), which will include the US and other Northeast

Asian partners as members<sup>23</sup>. The initiative will encourage cooperation on non-traditional soft security issues. Depending on the progress for cooperation, the agenda may, through a consensus, be expanded to discuss traditional security issues<sup>24</sup>.

In this view of the future architecture, ASEAN would be at the periphery, confined to only participate as observers, alongside the European Union.

India is another emerging factor that could alter the regional balance. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his opening statement made at the 12<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in Nay Pyi Taw, expressed his commitment to upgrade India's "Look East Policy" to that of an "Act East Policy". Adding another emerging power to the mix could likely increase the chances of friction in the region as major powers jostle against one another to further their interests.

A fourth initiative that perhaps has the most potential to sideline ASEAN are the informal bilateral summits between China and the US. Two have been held and there is talk that these could turn into an annual affair. For China, the meetings are a priority and are part of President Xi Jinping's initiative to establish a new type of relationship between major countries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The US has been more cautious, recognising that many issues continue to divide the two countries – whether bilaterally or in the context of wider regional and global issues. Yet even if such differences remain, there is sign of progress.

An example of this is the recent landmark US-China climate change deal, which has been

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<sup>23</sup> Northeast Asian countries include the Republic of Korea, Japan, China, Russia, the DPRK, Mongolia and the US.

<sup>24</sup> Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative – Moving beyond the Asian paradox towards peace and cooperation in Northeast Asia, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, Republic of Korea.

heralded as a breakthrough on this global issue, and gives new impetus to UN-led negotiations. This indicates the potential of exclusive and informal summits held between leaders of the world's two leading powers. From the perspective of ASEAN, and indeed all other smaller states, such a great power condominium on global issues could result in international policies being discussed and agreed upon without consultation with the rest of the region.

**US security allies are concerned that the US might be expected to accommodate Chinese interests.**

The private meetings between Presidents Obama and Xi may also symbolise something broader - America's acknowledgement of China's coming rise to great power status and equality. This has unnerved US security allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific, who are concerned that the US might be expected to accommodate certain Chinese interests. This could encourage countries, especially US allies involved in territorial disputes with China, to seek "potentially more destabilising options" in order to protect their own national interests<sup>25</sup>.

A closer US-China relationship has been greeted with considerable caution and even criticism. Some have called for Washington to "proactively shape the narrative" by articulating and championing its own vision for US-China relations<sup>26</sup>.

#### 1.4 ASEAN-led Institutions Criticised

Parallel to these developments, ASEAN-led institutions such as the EAS have been labelled as "talk shops" and criticised for its limitations in dealing with hot topic and

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<sup>25</sup> Erickson, Andrew S. & Liff, P Adam (2014) Not-so-Empty Talk, *Foreign Affairs*, 9 October, Online, Available: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142178/andrew-s-erickson-and-adam-p-liff/not-so-empty-talk> Retrieved: 10 December 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

potentially contentious political, economic and security issues. The group has responded by seeking ways to evolve and develop these institutions and processes.

**ASEAN must show greater leadership and come up with solutions to regional issues if it wants to be considered a key and central player in the region.**

ASEAN's Foreign Ministers have called for a stocktake of the EAS' current achievements and to chart its future direction in the lead up to the summit's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2015. The stocktake is also timely to allow the EAS an opportunity to recalibrate and reinvent itself, and if necessary, to ensure its relevance and survival in Asia's regional architecture.

ASEAN needs to show the region's stakeholders that its long standing rules, norms and processes embodied in the "ASEAN Way", as well as its institutions, are best placed as the *modus vivendi* to ensure continued peace and stability in the region. Otherwise, others cannot be blamed if countries grow disenchanted with ASEAN-led initiatives and seek alternatives.

While alternative, non-ASEAN platforms have not been able to gain acceptance and momentum among countries to date, this cannot be taken for granted.

ASEAN must show greater leadership and potential to come up with solutions to regional issues if it wants to be considered a key and central player in the region. Otherwise, ASEAN centrality will become more image than substance, and mean little more than serving as the host and coordinator of meetings.

The SIIA's earlier policy brief *Rethinking the East Asia Summit: Purpose, processes and agenda*, called for a need to create synergies

in the regional architecture<sup>27</sup>. It also highlighted the EAS as the apex summit with potential to provide guidance and direction for discussion of solutions and actionable plans at ministerial meetings. By forging links between the rest of the regional architecture, it was also proposed that ASEAN could endeavour to take into account salient discussions and interests raised during other regional forums in the Asia Pacific, such as the ARF, ADMM Plus Eight, and APEC. These recommendations are aimed at ensuring that the regional architecture remains inclusive, with its stakeholders effectively engaged in its processes.

## 2. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Set against the regional developments sketched above, this policy brief builds on those earlier proposals to consider how ASEAN should best establish and position itself to exercise its centrality for the benefit of the wider region, and to reinforce the group's unity.

### 2.1. ASEAN to maintain and develop current multiplex and inclusive regional architecture

While the region has multiple and overlapping processes that are untidy, ASEAN should not agree to a regional architecture where a single forum will control and potentially dominate the region's political, economic and security processes. Instead, a multiplex regional architecture is preferred as it maintains and develops the current network of different groupings. It also softens questions of who is included or excluded from the region, diffusing competition for influence and leadership among different powers. Having a multiplex regional architecture in place also gives more emphasis to the region's ideal, which is to build a community based on norms for cooperation, rather than an order predicated primarily on power calculations.

<sup>27</sup> SIIA (2014) *Rethinking the East Asia Summit: purpose, processes and agenda*, Singapore Institute of International Studies Policy Brief, September 2014, pp.1-12.



**A multiplex regional architecture allows the region to develop institutions that deal with functional interdependence and recognise shared concerns and priorities among its stakeholders.**

A multiplex regional architecture allows bilateral strategic and security arrangements to be tapped on in order to complement or be complemented by other economic and political groupings. It will also allow the region to develop institutions that deal with functional interdependence and recognise shared concerns and priorities among its stakeholders.

At present, there is neither strong reason nor support for any new processes, groupings or meetings to be initiated. It is more important that efforts be made to further develop the existing processes in order to meet the needs, perceptions and commitments of ASEAN and other regional stakeholders. ASEAN should work to keep institutions that it leads, or can influence, transparent and inclusive. This will allow the regional architecture to evolve and develop as Asia's geo-political, economic and strategic environment changes.

## **2.2. Presence of minilateral non-ASEAN-led summits**

Non ASEAN-led minilateral summits such as NAPCI, Six-Party Talks and the now-stalled Northeast Asian Trilateral Summit are potentially helpful in addressing immediate tangible problems, and could serve to strengthen the overall regional architecture.

Alternatively, a proliferation of such summits could indicate a growing perception that ASEAN is underperforming as a regional leader. While it may be too soon to tell what kind of implications minilateral summits could have on ASEAN centrality, adopting a defensive strategy against minilateralism might not serve in ASEAN's best interests.

ASEAN could consider remaining open minded to these bottom-up initiatives and question how it can best link them, and the issues they seek to deal with, to the existing regional architecture<sup>28</sup>.

For this, the EAS can play a role as the apex platform for discussion of key and also emerging issues – without seeking necessarily to coordinate or control these other initiatives. While we have given reasons that a multiplex regional architecture is best, opportunities for greater synergy and coordination is also needed.

## **2.3. Re-envisioning and positioning the EAS**

To provide for that, ASEAN should seek to re-envision and position the EAS to serve as the region's premier strategic dialogue. This should be with the aim of building understanding and trust among leaders, so that the EAS can serve as a platform for action as and when needed.

With incremental steps, a more substantial and sustained dialogue in the EAS can help develop relationships and trust that can, in turn, pave the way for further action. Such actions can be taken by the EAS, either collectively or among its members who recognise common concerns and can work together for the regional public good. This would prepare the EAS to move beyond serving as a "talk shop". To this end, we reiterate recommendations in our earlier policy brief on the East Asia Summit to ensure that this summit is more productive and better structured, while promoting greater spontaneity and flexibility.

## **2.4. Common Voice, Unity and Centrality**

While establishing a common foreign policy similar to that of the European Union is unrealistic and not feasible, there are

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with Dr Ralf Emmers, 25 September 2014.

“precedents for ASEAN to act and speak in unison”<sup>29</sup>.

It is becoming increasingly critical for ASEAN to remain united and neutral on regional and global issues. Only a united ASEAN can show its external dialogue partners that it is capable of playing a central role and offer regional leadership.

Towards this end, ASEAN members should aim to integrate more deeply, not only towards but also beyond the aims of an ASEAN Community 2015.

Economic integration *inter se* is important as it allows ASEAN leaders to consult with one another, as well as to speak strongly and in unison to promote ASEAN as a common market and an attractive well-connected integrated production base to foreign investors. But ASEAN needs to take greater strides to strengthen and improve coordination in the areas of political-security, and socio-cultural pillars, with the aim of establishing a more robust voice and unity on such issues. This requires the strengthening of ASEAN’s institutions.

The need to improve ASEAN’s organ institutions was addressed in the SIIA’s paper *Reviewing the ASEAN Charter: An opportunity to reform ASEAN processes*. Briefly, this includes (a) an expansion of the ASEAN Secretariat’s capacity with more effective use of finance and human resources; (b) an increased mandate for the Committee of Permanent Representatives to reduce workload of the ASEAN Secretariat; and (c) moving towards a more rules-based system to strengthen ASEAN’s formal dispute settlement mechanisms<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> Tay, Simon (2013) Growing an ASEAN voice?: A common platform in global and regional governance, *ERIA Discussion Paper Series*, pp. 1-16.

<sup>30</sup> SIIA (2014) Reviewing the ASEAN Charter: An opportunity to reform ASEAN processes, *Singapore Institute of International Affairs Policy Brief*, September 2014, pp. 1-12.

Further, ASEAN will need to reconsider the Association’s long-held behavioural norms, also known as the “ASEAN Way”, that “continue to overshadow ASEAN’s noble intention to become a rules-based organisation”<sup>31</sup>. Encouraging dialogue among ASEAN leaders allows member states to find a “common ASEAN position and voice with less time and cost in political will”<sup>32</sup>.

**ASEAN common voice should aim to include the creation and reiteration of norms so that ASEAN reinforces its normative power in the region.**

The aim to have processes to generate an ASEAN common voice can avoid, at the very least, a repeat of another failure to issue a joint communique as seen in 2012 during the 45<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Phnom Penh. But more, ASEAN should not see establishing a common voice on issues to be simply the lowest common denominator of all 10 of the ASEAN member state’s national interests.

ASEAN common voice should aim to be more, and include the creation and reiteration of norms so that ASEAN reinforces its normative power in the region<sup>33</sup>.

## 2.5. ASEAN Post-2015 and Centrality

There are many reasons for ASEAN to move towards an ASEAN Community 2015, and further beyond this towards a more advanced phase of regionalism. Some of these reasons relate to economic competitiveness and to the strengthen relationships amongst ASEAN members *inter se*.

<sup>31</sup> Sukma, Rizal (2014) ASEAN beyond 2015: The imperatives for further institutional changes, *ERIA Discussion Paper Series*, pp. 1-27.

<sup>32</sup> Tay, Simon (2013) Growing an ASEAN voice?: A common platform in global and regional governance, *ERIA Discussion Paper Series*, pp. 1-16.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

**Strengthening ASEAN centrality and unity should not and cannot be limited to the government level. It must involve bottom-up efforts where ASEAN's motto of "One Vision, One Identity, One Community" can also be communicated among the public and key stakeholders in ASEAN.**

As ASEAN consolidates and deepens its integration, improved coordination within and across ASEAN's three pillars will unify the group on issues such as the haze and disaster management. Such efforts will also deepen the consciousness of ASEAN among regional actors.

However, strengthening ASEAN centrality and unity should not and cannot be limited to the government level. It must involve bottom-up efforts where ASEAN's motto of "One Vision, One Identity, One Community", can also be communicated among the public and key stakeholders in ASEAN. This includes businesses, think tanks, and Civil Society Organisations<sup>34</sup>.

It is here where the launch of the ASEAN Communication Master Plan during the 25<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in Nay Pyi Taw, will play a key role in strengthening ASEAN centrality and unity from the bottom up. The Master Plan serves to promote ASEAN as a people-oriented, people-centred community, and to build a resilient community with the ability to provide a holistic and practical solution to trends and challenges in the region.<sup>35</sup>

Implementing these efforts will not be easy, and challenges, delays and limitations are likely. However, within the region, it is notable that only ASEAN - and not only one or

a combination of the major powers - has had the ability to muster a multilateral commitment. The on-going effort to integrate ASEAN as a community beyond 2015 can serve as a sound and even exemplary foundation for the wider region.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

The simultaneous rise of Asian powers such as China and Japan, alongside the existing US superpower, is likely to stretch Asia further in a complex array of alliance networks forged to counter power plays by major powers. This is of concern not only to ASEAN but to all countries in the region, including the major powers themselves.

It is for this reason that promoting Southeast Asia as a region of peace, stability and prosperity, as espoused in the ASEAN Community's Post-2015 vision, will play an increasingly important role.

While each country must play its part, and some have new initiatives or rhetoric, ASEAN has a considerable head start in contributing to and leading the regional processes. The onus will continue to fall on ASEAN, which forms the core of the region's multilateral forums, to help ensure that their partners remain committed to peace and stability as espoused in the principles, norms and rules of the ASEAN Way.

ASEAN is made up of small and medium-sized countries, where even collectively, its economies are dwarfed by that of the major and middle powers in the region. But what it lacks in power and size, the group can make up for by utilising its centrality, underlying legitimacy and trust to develop greater normative power.

ASEAN can further strengthen its centrality and unity in the region through its good intentions and best efforts to use the position that it already enjoys.

<sup>34</sup> Chairman's Statement of the 25<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit: "Moving Forward in Unity to a Peaceful and Prosperous Community", Nay Pyi Taw, 12 November 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Nay Pyi Taw Declaration on the ASEAN Community's Post-2015 Vision, Nay Pyi Taw, 12 November 2014.

Asia is opening a new chapter in history, and ASEAN must find and assert its place and right to shape the region's future. Otherwise, it risks getting side-lined in the regional architecture.

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All views expressed in this briefing are those of the authors, unless otherwise cited.

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This is a Track II policy brief authored by the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA), which seeks to present detailed policy prescriptions for experts and policy makers who look closely at ASEAN issues. The SIIA is a member of the ASEAN Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) network of think tanks that are involved in Track II diplomacy in the region.

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