



IDSS COMMENTARIES (36/2003)

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Towards an ASEAN Security Community at Bali

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3 Oct 2003

ASEAN Heads of Government who will meet in Bali next week are expected to reaffirm their commitment to a set of comprehensive security principles for the grouping for the second time in ASEAN's history. Just as in 1976, when emerging strategic conditions forced ASEAN to respond with new mechanisms for security cooperation, the threat of terrorism and other non-traditional security issues, as well as the economic challenges posed by a rapidly growing China and India, have compelled the regional body to address the increasing pressure it faces on the economic and security fronts. At their 9th Summit to be held from 7-8 October 2003, the ASEAN leaders will attempt to lay the foundation for the establishment of an ASEAN Security Community to complement the ASEAN Economic Community that they have undertaken to forge in the coming two decades.

The security community idea has been floated at a time when ASEAN member states have realised that the lack of direction troubling the organisation since the Asian Financial Crisis has not only diminished ASEAN's standing internationally, but is impeding cooperation in the region. These factors are forcing ASEAN to reconsider long-standing practices such as non-intervention, non-interference, and the de-centralised process of intra-regional collaboration. Thus ASEAN is undertaking efforts to establish a regional economic community to better coordinate economic development. Significantly the ASEAN Foreign Ministers also took the unprecedented step in Phnom Penh last June of openly urging a member state to refrain from human rights violations.

It is against this changing backdrop that Indonesia in its capacity as Chair of the ASEAN Standing Committee has submitted a proposal to create an ASEAN security community by 2020. Driving Jakarta's plan is an understanding of the strong linkages between economics and security. A new ASEAN security community, therefore, aims to complement the ongoing process of building an ASEAN economic community. Indonesia's proposal calls for a framework that allows member states to work together on sensitive security issues—especially those of a trans-national nature—without the constraints current interpretations of non-intervention and non-interference impose. Most prominent in the proposal is the introduction of instruments for regional cooperation on counter-terrorism, trans-national crime, and dispute resolution that can make it easier for member states to request for assistance. Buttressing these mechanisms will be a second Declaration of ASEAN Concord formulating the future ASEAN security collaboration.

Defining a Security Community

The concept of a security community, introduced in the mid-1950s, envisages a fabric of institutions, social linkages, economic exchanges, and domestic political similarities that make war “unimaginable” between the democracies of North America and Western Europe. Essentially, it asserts that a strong web of interactions at the inter-state and sub-state levels allows for the resolution of even severe differences without the need to resort to force. Here, the existence of broad, multi-layered inter-linkages increases the costs of inter-state violence and provides domestic as well as external pressure on governments to seek peaceful solutions. At the same time, the intensity of exchanges also promotes a commonality of values and identities that discourage the use of force among states within the “community”. Later thinking on the idea of security communities, on the other hand, tends to focus on the actions that allow for the development of shared ideals and practices.

Nonetheless, two strong features stand out in discussions about “security communities”. First is the erosion of traditional concepts of sovereignty, which sees states as fully autonomous from each other and able to exert absolute control over clearly demarcated geographical boundaries. It is suggested that shared values, identities, practices, and linkages are able to constrain a state action from both inside and out. The second element is a belief that the presence of some sort of security community, whether already present or consciously constructed, promotes peace among its members. In fact, almost all proponents of security communities assert either that peace is already extant in such a grouping, or that it is an aim that the defined states aspire towards.

The Challenge for ASEAN

ASEAN possesses some of the pre-requisites for the establishment of a security community. It is a distinct group of states with a clear set of norms and practices that shape relations among its members, a foreign policy elite that is able to inform decisions in the various capitals, as well as track record for collective bargaining vis-à-vis external entities. The relatively long 36 year history of the organisation also gives member states, especially the founding members, substantial mutual understanding. In the event that Indonesia, the largest and arguably most influential member of the grouping, is able to take consistent initiative, it is also possible for ASEAN to advance with relative ease on particular collective issues.

The factors that make it advantageous for ASEAN to pursue the creation of a security community, however, may also prove to be impediments to any such effort. Given the importance of traditional sovereignty issues to many ASEAN members, it may be difficult for the organisation to modify existing interpretations of the core notions of non-intervention and non-interference. Further complicating matters is the long-standing practice of seeking consensus within the group. This makes it difficult to even begin pushing forward with the more extensive and intrusive forms of cooperation needed to deal with the many transnational security issues now facing Southeast Asia. Even if some members agree to move ahead first, the question is whether such less-than-complete ASEAN collaboration is sufficient to address the hugely complex, non-territorial security concerns now facing the entire region.

Another problematic area is the relationship between the new frameworks in the current security community proposal and existing ASEAN mechanisms and agreements. For instance, it is uncertain how the instruments for security collaboration under the security community plan will relate to existing dispute resolution and security cooperation vehicles

such as the ASEAN High Council and ASEAN Troika. It is also unclear how a new arrangement on security building in ASEAN relates to existing legal documents, such as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. Further, in light of the far-reaching nature of Jakarta's proposal, the organisation will need to find a means to resolve potential contradictions between a security community and existing ASEAN legal understandings.

An attempt to establish an ASEAN security community is also likely to face practical concerns. One such matter is the allocation of resources. Current ASEAN instruments, such as the ASEAN Secretariat, face the issue of trying to fulfil its many tasks on a very limited budget and inadequate resources. Yet, given the economic and political problems in the region, the sources of additional finances and resources are far from obvious. The second issue deals with the delegation of authority. In order to be effective and credible, mechanisms in the security community must have some ability to initiate and perhaps even impose solutions in certain instances. In view of the sensitivity of most ASEAN members to non-domestic pressure, however, it is not evident that member states are ready to delegate authority over critical issues to a regional entity.

Security Community's Appeal

Regardless of its many shortcomings, the creation of an ASEAN security community has a certain appeal. Having an ASEAN that is once more able to function effectively for the interests of the region and an Indonesia that is able to play a constructive role within this framework again is something that is likely to benefit both member states as well as the organization as a whole. Likewise, working toward the eventual removal of war as a means to statecraft is an aspiration of almost all human societies. In fact, recent European history suggests the possibility of turning this hope into reality. However, without shared liberal democratic values and long-term cooperation against a common threat, it is not clear how much Southeast Asia can replicate the North Atlantic experience.

Nevertheless, the fact that a Europe torn by violence for centuries now appears able to unite in peace should provide at least some hope for the future of a security community in Southeast Asia. Despite the difficulties anticipated ASEAN members should at least give serious thought to the idea of creating a security community. Given the challenges now facing individual member states as well as ASEAN as an organization, Indonesia's proposal tabled at the 36th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Phnom Penh may provide some common ground for Southeast Asia to begin solving their difficulties together as a region.

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