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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **ASEAN as a Model for Central Asia**

By Loro Horta

### **Synopsis**

*Central Asia remains the only region in the world that does not have a regional organisation. Efforts by external actors at fostering regionalism have so far had limited success. Can ASEAN be a model for the Central Asian region?*

### **Commentary**

IN 1993 the leaders of Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan agreed to call the region encompassing their respective nations Central Asia. However, this initial enthusiasm for regionalism soon dissipated as the five former Soviet republics grew increasingly isolated from one another.

Due to the region's strategic location and abundance in natural resources such as oil and natural gas, several great powers have tried to promote regional organisations to foster cooperation between them and the region. As the Central Asian states ponder whether they should form their own regional grouping, ASEAN could well be a model for them to seriously consider.

### **Russia, CSTO and SCO**

In 1992 Russia and several former Soviet republics – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Ukraine and the Central Asian states - formed the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Russia also sponsored the customs union linking itself with Belarus and Kazakhstan in 2010. However, both Russian initiatives have had modest success at promoting regionalism. Firstly, the SCTO, as its name suggests, is a security and military-focused organisation. Secondly, it is not a regional bloc having European, Middle Eastern and Central Asian nations.

As a result Central Asian countries have different and sometimes conflicting reasons for joining these Russian-inspired organisations. Uzbekistan, the most populous and militarily strong country in the region, has withdrawn its membership from the CSTO while Kazakhstan, the richest of the Central Asian countries, is the only one to join the customs union.

In 2001 China, Russia and the Central Asian states, minus Turkmenistan, formed the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) with its initial aim of promoting border security and counterterrorism cooperation. The organisation has today evolved to cover other fields such as economics and scientific cooperation. The better-funded SCO seems to have been far more successful than the Russian initiatives. China is by far the largest trading partner of the region and regional leaders look at the much wealthier China as a source of capital and

diplomatic support.

While the SCO has been effective at solving border disputes and promoting trade with China, it has done little to promote trade between the regional countries. Trade and even cultural exchanges remain minimal between the five Central Asian states. American and European initiatives promoting regional integration and trade such as the US-sponsored New Silk Road Initiative have had even more modest results.

## **ASEAN**

One of the reasons these external attempts at regionalism have failed is because they tend to reflect external priorities and concerns, with both Russian and Chinese initiatives being modeled on Western examples such as the European Union (EU) and NATO.

Instead of focusing on formal and institutionalised arrangements, Central Asian leaders may start at informal arrangements that aim at promoting mutual trust such as meetings between heads of states and other officials. While organisations such as the SCO have been successful at managing disputes between China and the regional countries, they had done little to promote trust among the five regional countries.

Water resources sharing and border disputes are the most sensitive issues in the region. Instead of trying to tackle these issues first, less sensitive issues where there is some consensus should be the priority. While small initiatives such as increasing cultural and sport exchanges may seem trivial they can slowly open the way to higher level exchanges.

Central Asia is far more homogeneous than Southeast Asia. With the exception of Tajikistan, Central Asian nations are ethnic Turk and all, including Tajikistan, are Sunni Muslims. All were under the Russian empire and the Soviet Union for 150 years and Russian remains the lingua franca of Central Asia. While tensions exist over water resources and borders, so far these have not erupted into major clashes such as those seen in Indochina.

### **Can Central Asia follow the ASEAN Way?**

Central Asian leaders all subscribe to the principles of none interference in the domestic affairs of other states and the peaceful resolution of disputes - principles enshrined in both the SCTO and SCO charters. These principles are also central in the ASEAN Way.

It is worth remembering that when ASEAN was created in 1967, the region was plagued by tensions with some states even refusing to recognise the existence of others.

ASEAN, which was confronted with far greater challenges, has grown to become the most successful regional organisation in the developing world. The chances for a similar organisation to be created in Central Asia are good, provided that appropriate models that keep in mind local realities and conditions are followed.

Contrary to some perceptions, regional leaders have shown receptivity to multilateralism when they supported the creation of the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA). An institution characterised by its discreet diplomacy, one of the hall marks of ASEAN which Central Asia can adopt is its quiet informal diplomacy.

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