Whither ASEAN Centrality in East Asia’s Defence Regionalization?

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For a region whose early formative experience in regionalism has primarily been non-military and development-oriented—the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as a kind of ‘first mover’ in institutionalized regional cooperation, comes most readily to mind—East Asia’s proliferation in recent times of intraregional defence ties has been particularly striking. To be sure, the region historically has played host to a number of collective defence arrangements which emerged during the Cold War years—examples include America’s longstanding alliances with Australia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines and Thailand; the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) comprising Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand the United Kingdom; and the now defunct Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). However, although the troubles that led to the demise of SEATO prove instructive when the region began experimenting with an indigenous regionalism—with ASEAN making clear to all and sundry, despite communist Vietnam’s protestations throughout the Cold War, that it (ASEAN) was not a collective defence arrangement but an institution devoted purely to intramural economic cooperation and social development—the security landscape of contemporary East Asia paints quite a different picture, however. Not only are regional countries like Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea and Vietnam establishing and enhancing bilateral defence and security ties between and among themselves (as well as with the United States), but region-wide multilateral defence forums—beginning with dialogues conducted under the aegis of the twenty-seven member ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the nonofficial Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) and subsequently, the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus (the ten ASEAN countries plus Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia and the United States)—have also become commonplace features in East Asian security.

Against this backdrop, this paper will assess the place and role of ASEAN in these burgeoning—and, according to one account, tangled—web(s) of defence relations that crisscross the East Asian region, many of which are not tied explicitly to ASEAN. To the extent that the principle of ‘ASEAN Centrality’ is central to the multilateral facets of East Asia’s evolving security architecture—for which ASEAN ostensibly serves as the ‘fulcrum’, according to various pundits—how, if at all, does it relate to the defence-oriented facets of that architecture (or

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indeed to facets not necessarily part of that architecture)? While local factors, bilateral concerns and transnational security threats of a ‘non-traditional’ nature account in no small measure for the shared penchant of many regional countries in their quest for build defence cooperation with their neighbours and extra-regional partners and to strengthen their own capacities to deal with complex challenges, the apprehension many countries share over the rising military might of China and the recent diplomatic assertiveness it seems to have assumed vis-à-vis its East and South China Seas disputes have equally and presumably spurred the region-wide rise in defence regionalization as some regional countries respond willingly to overtures from great powers like Japan and the United States in their respective ‘pivots’ to the region. As an ostensibly ‘neutral’ institution, ASEAN has never articulated its position on bilateral defence relations between regional countries nor, for that matter, multilateral defence initiatives of which it is not officially a part. With these concerns in mind, this paper will review and discuss forms and patterns of defence regionalization in East Asia and assess the place of ASEAN’s so-called centrality therein.

**Southeast Asian Defence Regionalization**

Although ASEAN is not a military organization, it has nonetheless permitted a gradual regionalization of defence relations among its member countries beginning from the Cold War period. As Ghazalie Shafie, the former foreign minister of Malaysia, once noted about ASEAN, ‘The limitation of regional cooperation within a formal framework should not prevent countries of the region from trying to forge the closest possible links on a bilateral basis with one another’. For the five founding members of ASEAN (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand), SEATO became the antithesis of what indigenous regionalism ought to be. As Carlos Romulo, the former foreign minister of the Philippines explained regarding the raison d’être behind ASEAN: ‘We did not phase out SEATO in order to set up another one’. On his part, Amitav Acharya has identified the rejection of any form of multilateral security and defence cooperation, whether with or without great power sponsorship, as a historical ‘path-dependent’ disposition that undergirds regionalism in East Asia. Be that as it may, the explicit rejection of collective defence as the institutional form and raison d’être for ASEAN by its member countries did not prevent Vietnam from seeing ASEAN as a defence alliance during the Cold War. As noted earlier, while at that time Vietnam did not find ASEAN’s prescriptions for regional order—particularly those stipulated in the latter’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation

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(accessed 11 September 2014); Roger Mitton, ‘The ‘Pacific secretary’ needs to ensure her regional legacy’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 21 March 2011.


(TAC)—acceptable because the Vietnamese saw ASEAN as essentially a US-sponsored organization and a closet SEATO through which Washington could continue to exert its influence over Southeast Asia. Notably, the Vietnamese were not the only people to view ASEAN in this fashion. ‘ASEAN was the product of Asian initiative. But it was hardly an Asian creation’, according to one regional analyst, fairly or otherwise. ‘Behind the Asian initiative was the American ‘support’ and ‘discreet guidance’. Washington almost acted like a mid-wife in the birth of ASEAN’. As such, from its inception in August 1967, ASEAN has assiduously avoided being identified as a defence organization in order to preclude allegations that it is a Western-sanctioned alliance aimed, at least indirectly, at preserving the West’s neo-colonialist domination of Southeast Asia. In this respect, ASEAN leaders apparently felt this reasoning to be sufficiently justified, so long as a clear distinction existed between defence bilateralisms (i.e., alliances, in particular) and regional multilateralism (i.e., ASEAN).

As far back as 1976, several ASEAN countries have sought to establish bilateral border security agreements and intelligence exchanges among themselves to deal with communist insurgencies in their respective domestic domains. Bilateral collaboration persisted despite open political squabbling between leaders of the cooperating countries in question. In the face of the emerging Soviet-Vietnamese partnership and the looming Soviet naval presence in the region in the early 1980s, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore even raised the prospect—unsupported at the time by his ASEAN counterparts—of upgrading and expanding extant bilateral military exercises conducted among ASEAN states into trilateral and quadrilateral enterprises. By 1989, bilateral military exercises between ASEAN states had become sufficiently thick—with as many as twenty-five if not more exercises—to merit being described by then Indonesian armed forces chief (later vice-president) Try Sustrisno as a ‘defence spider web’. By the mid-1990s, trilateral military exercises among Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, the three ‘core’ member states of ASEAN, had become commonplace. Foremost among their aims of creating this web of military ties was the building of confidence and trust among themselves and their respective defence establishments. As Indonesian analyst Dewi Fortuna Anwar once observed, ‘These military ties and exercises serve many purposes, the most important being to get to know and understand each other, thus

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11 Acharya, A Survey of Military Cooperation among the ASEAN States, p. 15.
removing suspicions and misunderstandings’. ASEAN also took advantage of the opening provided by the conclusion of the Cold War to formally introduce regional security issues to its institutional agenda. At the Fourth ASEAN Summit in 1992, ‘political and security cooperation’ ranked first among the list of issues identified in the 1992 Singapore Declaration (see paragraphs 3 and 4) which laid out ASEAN’s post-Cold War agenda.

As we shall see below, thanks to a serendipitous confluence of factors—the end of Cold War bipolarity, a relative stable albeit uncertain regional environment, a perceived need to engage a rising China, and America growing receptivity to multilateral diplomacy in the region—ASEAN, with help from its external partners and the extraordinary concession and privilege as primus inter pares (first among equals) granted the regional organization, would go on to foster an East Asia-wide architecture of institutions over the next two decades. But it would not be until 2003, with the Bali II Concord’s endorsement for the creation of an ASEAN Security Community (ASC) and, in 2004, with the release of the ASC (or Vientiane) Plan of Action, that the plan for an ASEAN defence ministerial forum began to take shape. In May 2006 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, ASEAN leaders inaugurated the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM). Described in one instance as ‘an important milestone for ASEAN’, the formation of the ADMM was seen as the first step towards the eventuation of the ASC—subsequently renamed the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC). The ADMM’s four-fold remit comprises the promotion of regional peace and stability through dialogue and defence and security cooperation, the provision of ‘strategic-level guidance’ for defence and security cooperation within ASEAN, the promotion of mutual trust and confidence through enhancing transparency and openness, and contribution to the establishment of the APSC and promote the implementation of the APSC’s Vientiane Action Program (VAP), which comprises ten action items oriented towards, one, strengthening and integrating the ASEAN members into a cohesive single entity, and, two, the narrowing the developmental gap between old and new ASEAN members through practical assistance furnished by dialogue partners.

Beyond its important availability of a forum for high-level discussions among ASEAN defence ministers—to that end, the ADMM has also since 2009 added annual leaders ‘retreats’ to its process—the ADMM has hitherto focused principally on select non-traditional security issues such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), maritime security, military medicine, peacekeeping and defence industrialization, and fostering intra-ASEAN cooperation on these areas. Whether these developments will eventually translate into conventional or ‘hard’ defence collaboration, much less collective defence, among ASEAN states remains to be seen. However, even though most regional observers do not see that happening anytime soon. That said, with the formation of the ADMM, there appears to be a collective sense of finality shared among ASEAN leaders, who see it as a key piece of the architectural puzzle without which the regional organization cannot become a single community. Crucially, the ADMM is

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not conceived as a standalone arrangement but rather ‘an integral part of ASEAN’, one that adds value to and complements the overall ASEAN process.\(^{20}\)

The regionalization of defence relations in Southeast Asia also includes activities, some of which had been initiated as early as 2000, such as the ASEAN Chiefs of Army Multilateral Meeting, the ASEAN Chiefs of Defence Forces Informal Meeting (ACDFIM), the ASEAN Military Operation Informal Meeting (AMOIM), the ASEAN Military Intelligence Informal Meeting (AMIIM), the ASEAN Navy Interaction, the ASEAN Air Force Chiefs Conference, the ASEAN Chiefs of Military Medicine Meeting, the ASEAN Armies Rifles Meeting, the Expert Working Group, and the Workshop on the Use of ASEAN Military Assets and Capacities in HADR. Although these initiatives have officially been described by ASEAN as ‘outside the ASEAN framework’,\(^ {21}\) the ADMM could arguably be seen as an implicit and/or informal overarching framework under which some if not all of these disparate activities can now be gathered. Whichever the case, it is nonetheless noteworthy that some of their aims and activities are entirely consistent and congruent with those of the ADMM, thereby suggesting a reasonably high level of coordination or the possibility for such between and among them. For instance, the ACDFIM, the annual gathering of defence forces chiefs, plays a significant and direct role in guiding all activities aimed at achieving effective practical cooperation among ASEAN militaries. For example, the ACDFIM concluded at its 2010 edition that ASEAN militaries ought to pursue closer collaboration in response to non-traditional security challenges. To that extent, the ACDFIM has sought to establish a dialogue and/or cooperative mechanisms for HADR and military medicine and adopted work plans on information and capacity exchanges in intra-ASEAN maritime security, peacekeeping operations and counterterrorism.\(^ {22}\) Moreover, the 2012 AMOIM took an important step towards furthering HADR interoperability among ASEAN militaries through its endorsement of standard operating procedures on the use of military assets for HADR via the framework of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Response and Emergency Response (AADMER).

The cooperative efforts by littoral states of the Malacca Straits in combating piracy deserve mention as well. Concerns harboured by Indonesia and Malaysia over the potential strategic ramifications of the US Pacific Command’s (PACOM) proposal for a Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI), which would rationalize the involvement of extra-regional powers in the straits, led them, together with Singapore, to form Operation MALSINDO (i.e., Malaysia-Singapore-Indonesia). Launched in 2004, the operation involved trilateral maritime patrols by their respective navies—with each navy restricted to patrolling its own nation’s territorial waters—that sought to interdict piracy and smuggling activities in the straits. With Thailand’s participation from 2008 onwards, MALSINDO was renamed the Malacca Straits Sea Patrols. An air element, the ‘Eyes in the Sky’ initiative, was included in 2005, augmenting the naval patrols with maritime patrol aircraft sorties. Unlike the naval patrols, however, the air sorties,


\(^{21}\) See Paragraph 5 of the ‘Concept Paper for the Establishment of an ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting’.

which had on-board each aircraft a Combined Maritime Patrol Team (CMPT) containing a military officer from each of the participating countries, are permitted to fly over the waters of the countries involved. Together, the naval and aerial elements make up the Malacca Straits Patrols (MSP).\(^\text{23}\) Other components of the MSP include the Intelligence Exchange Group (IEG), which subsequently developed the Malacca Straits Patrols Information System (MSP-IS) aimed at improving coordination and situational awareness at sea among the participating countries.\(^\text{24}\)

Conducted both under the auspices of ASEAN as well as outside of it, defence relations in Southeast Asia have regionalized to the point that they have become relatively institutionalized even if they do all not link together in any coordinated and coherent fashion. It remains to be seen whether and how they contribute as building blocks, formally and informally, for the APSC envisaged to be established by 2015—an improbable outcome, given the many political limitations within ASEAN states as well as the problems between them. As early as 1989, Malaysian foreign minister Abu Hassan Omar mooted the idea of an ASEAN ‘defence community’ that presumably would ‘take the ASEAN states to new heights of political and military cooperation’, whilst his Indonesian counterpart, Mochtar Kusumaatmadja, made a similar appeal for an ASEAN ‘military arrangement’.\(^\text{25}\) Indeed, what was equally surprising was their readiness to publicly promote a vision for a regional defence community even before the materialization of the ‘One Southeast Asia’ notion—all ten Southeast Asian countries coming together under one institutional roof—with the entry into ASEAN of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (the so-called ‘CLMV’ countries) in the mid-1990s.\(^\text{26}\) To the extent the APSC or other vision of regional defence-security community in Southeast Asia is to be realized, it will likely have to be based in part on the aforementioned existing and still evolving patterns of defence relations.

**Asia-Wide Defence Regionalization**

Before we consider the ADMM-Plus or the ARF, it is worth noting non-ASEAN-based forms of defence multilateralism in Asia. Among the fastest growing are multilateral military-to-military exercises, many of which had been initiated by the United States. They include: CARAT (Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training), a bilateral maritime exercises held between America and various Asian states; Cobra Gold, a Thai-US bilateral army exercise that has since grown to include Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore from ASEAN as well as other Asian countries; Cope Tiger, a trilateral air exercise involving Singapore, Thailand and the United States; SEACAT (Southeast Asia Cooperation Against Terrorism), a maritime counterterrorism exercise held between America and various ASEAN members; and, RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific Exercise), the world’s largest international maritime exercise involving the United States and a big number of Asia-Pacific countries including some ASEAN members and, for the first


time during the 2014 edition, China.\(^{27}\) Ironically, despite the received wisdom that ASEAN states favour security multilateralism over America’s longstanding preference for bilateralism, the participation by ASEAN militaries in some of the aforementioned exercises with the US military, it has been reported, is in fact quite the opposite: the ASEAN states have tended to prefer bilateral rather than multilateral military exercises and exchanges with the United States because of the perceptibly higher level of knowledge and technology transfers they stand to receive from bilateral engagements with the United States.\(^{28}\) The Western Pacific Naval Symposium, which comprises the navies of over twenty member countries, has met on a biennial basis since 1987. Together with extant collective defence arrangements like the FPDA\(^{29}\) and America’s alliances and security partnerships with a number of East Asian states, these initiatives have proved critical to enhancing the region’s ability to handle HADR challenges such as the Indian Ocean tsunamis in 2004, Cyclone Nargis that struck Myanmar in 2008, and Typhoon Haiyan that affected the Philippines in 2013.\(^{30}\) Other arrangements include initiatives like the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), which is directed at interdicting the flow of weapons of mass destruction and strategic materials critical to their development, and the Trilateral Security Dialogue comprising Australia, Japan and the United States.\(^{31}\)

Quite possibly the most prominent expression of non-ASEAN-based defence multilateralism is the Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD), an annual gathering for defence leaders, practitioners and intellectuals convened in Singapore by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).\(^{32}\) Its express purpose is to provide a forum in which defence ministers could engage in dialogue aimed at building confidence between their military establishments, while at the same time fostering practical security cooperation.\(^{33}\) The SLD 2012 made waves with then US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta’s revelation that the United States would deploy sixty per cent of its naval assets to the Asia-Pacific by 2020, ten per cent more than its existing forces in the region, as part of a ‘rebalancing’ strategy that, the secretary insisted, is not an attempt to contain China.\(^{34}\) ASEAN had long held to the supposition that East Asia is simply not ready to host a regular defence ministerial—an assumption challenged by the success of the SLD, which, despite being a non-official dialogue, has shown it is indeed possible to bring defence and military chiefs together annually. That said, ASEAN’s concern has proved even more basic: in 2002, ASEAN did not support the proposal by then Japan Defence Agency director, General

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Nakatani Gen, to convert the SLD into a formal ‘Asian Defence Ministerial Meeting’, presumably out of concern that such a move would threaten not only the ARF’s default position as the only multilateral security forum servicing the entire Asia-Pacific, but indeed the very centrality of ASEAN in the existing regional architecture. A plausible attraction of the SLD for international defence elites is precisely because it is not an official event, which allows senior defence leaders to offer articulations at the SLD that approximate their governments’ positions without official attribution as such. At any rate, it has undercut ASEAN’s long-held assumption that the region is not yet ready for a ministerial-level defence forum.

The establishment of the ADMM-Plus in 2010 underscores the importance which the ASEAN countries assign to engaging the external powers—a security-oriented expression, if you will, of the open and inclusive regionalism which ASEAN has long espoused. According to the ADMM Joint Declaration issued at its inaugural meeting, the aim of the ADMM-Plus—a narrowly conceived one, according to some observers—is to ‘enable the ADMM to cooperate with the non-ASEAN countries to build capacity and better prepare ASEAN to address the complex security challenges’. Similar to the ADMM, the ADMM-Plus is oriented towards enabling and enhancing the region’s ability to respond better to non-traditional security threats. Crudely put, a key purpose for involving the ‘Plus Eight’ dialogue partners is to have them help ASEAN help itself. While the arrangement involves the participation of eight extra-regional powers, the reference point is effectively Southeast Asia. The second meeting is scheduled to be held in Brunei Darussalam in 2013. It was initially agreed that the ADMM would continue to meet annually but that the ADMM-Plus meetings would be held only every three years. However, it has already become widely accepted that this interval is far too long for the organization to have any direct effect on unfolding security issues. As noted, the recommendation to make the ADMM-Plus a biennial exercise following the ADMM-Plus in 2013 was welcomed by the ASEAN defence ministers when they met in Phnom Penh in May 2012.

Importantly, ASEAN’s multilateral defence engagement with dialogue partners did not begin with the ADMM-Plus, but has its origins in a number of defence-oriented activities and modalities that began in the ARF in the 1990s—the ARF Senior Officials’ Meeting (ARF-SOM),

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38 A concern some defence officials of ASEAN countries have registered to Ambassador (retired) Tan Seng Chye, who directs the NADI secretariat. The author is indebted to Ambassador Tan for sharing his impressions (14 May 2012).
ARF Inter-Sessional Group on Confidence Building Measures (ARF-ISG-CBM), the ARF Security Policy Conference (ASPC), and the ARF Defence Officials’ Dialogue (ARF-DOD)—which collectively comprise what officials refer to as the ‘ARF defence track’. In 1997, the ARF-SOM introduced a luncheon for defence officials from ARF countries attending the meeting to discuss defence-related matters. There it was agreed that the leaders’ retreat of the ARF-SOM in 1999-2000 should accommodate participation by defence officials.\(^4\) In 2001, ARF foreign ministers invited defence officials to join yet another luncheon, this time at the ARF-ISG-CBM which later became the ARF-ISG-CBM/PD when preventive diplomacy was added to the grouping’s remit.\(^5\) At these combined gatherings, ARF defence officials reportedly ‘exchanged views and information on their respective defence policies, including defence conversion, and reviewed their political-military and defence dialogues, high-level defence contacts, joint training and personnel exchanges with fellow ARF participants’.\(^6\) These preliminary tie-ups with defence officials paved the way for the establishment of the ARF-DOD in 2001. In 2002, the first formal ARF-DOD took place in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei. Since then, ARF-DODs have been convened regularly, meeting at least three times a year, before every ARF-ISG-CBM/PD, ARF-SOM, and the ARF Ministers’ Meeting itself. Much like other dialogue processes in general, ARF-DODs are venues for regular discussions and exchanges of views on regional and international situations and the common security issues facing the ARF, and proposals on measures to increase the effectiveness of security and defence cooperation among ARF members. That ASEAN’s own defence track leading to the formation of the ADMM in 2006 started later than the ARF defence track reflects arguably the contribution, if indirect, which the ARF made to the enhancement of defence regionalism in Southeast Asia.

**Whither ASEAN Centrality?**

Perhaps no concept underscores better the significance of ASEAN to regional cooperation and governance in East Asia than the organization’s ostensible centrality in the architectures and conventions of regionalism. Before considering ASEAN’s role and place in the various expressions of defence regionalization and regionalism discussed above, a review of the debate on ‘ASEAN Centrality’ is in order.

There is no question ASEAN has played a key role in creating the region’s institutional architecture. Since the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) trade forum was established in 1989—whose modality ASEAN, while not the originator of APEC, nonetheless played an influential role in shaping—ASEAN has gone on a spawning spree, birthing one institution after another in an ad hoc way: the ARF in 1994, the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) in 1999, the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005 and the ADMM-Plus in 2010. East Asia’s regional architecture as such has been described variously as a ‘complex’, an ‘ecosystem’, a ‘multiplex’, and/or a ‘patchwork’

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\(^5\) The ARF-ISG-CBM/PD serves as a clearinghouse and catalyst, so to speak, for proposals on confidence-building and preventive diplomacy. It constitutes the third tier of the pyramid of ARF activities at the intergovernmental (or Track 1) level, with the Ministers’ Meeting and the ARF-SOM make up the first and second tiers respectively.

of institutional arrangements. The experiences with all these formations leave one with the conclusion that any promotion of ideas for new regionalism in East Asia, if it is to succeed, has to have the endorsement and support of ASEAN. However, neither the pride nor place of ASEAN within a regional multilateral architecture that has emerged essentially through an ad hoc process of institution-building presumably came by way of a preconceived strategic vision and plan which ASEAN might have harboured. Rather, the increasingly central role played by ASEAN in East Asian regionalism has emerged more as ‘an outcome of its pragmatic approach to problem-solving and its own evolution’ in response to the changing international political and economic environment. Be that as it may, the fundamental challenge confronting ASEAN’s ostensible stewardship of Asia’s architecture today is the purported disillusionment of non-ASEAN countries over not only their place in that architecture but ASEAN’s apparent inability to drive regional economic integration and broker intraregional disputes.

If the Cold War aim of NATO, as its first Secretary-General Lord Hastings Lionel Ismay famously said, was to ‘to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down’, then it could presumably be said that the broad aim of Asian regionalism, as envisaged and executed by ASEAN, has arguably been to keep the Americans on board, the Chinese in check, and ASEAN in charge. The ASEAN Charter, established in 2007 and ratified by all ten ASEAN member countries in late 2008, stresses the need 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’. In the organization’s report of its Forty-third ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Hanoi in July 2010, much was made about ASEAN’s dialogue partner countries reaffirming ‘their unequivocal support for ASEAN Centrality’, as well as their declared hope that ‘ASEAN would continue to play a central role in the emerging regional architecture’. The centrality of ASEAN is therefore best understood as the perceived default mechanism—a perception ASEAN, above all, has laboured

long and hard to maintain, it has been argued\textsuperscript{51}—for regional order and stability in the absence of a single power or a group of powers which could be accepted by one and all to lead the formation of an East Asia-wide agenda, promote regional cooperation and integration, and drive the provision of public goods for the entire region.\textsuperscript{52} It is also viewed as a benchmark for the shaping of external relations with other powers and international bodies.\textsuperscript{53} As Ernest Bower has put it, ASEAN ‘is the glue that binds key actors together, either through direct membership or via regional structures’.\textsuperscript{54}

The most common conception of centrality is in terms of ASEAN as regional leader. This conception is most commonly associated with the notion of ASEAN as the driver of regionalism.\textsuperscript{55} In contrast to most regions where global and/or regional great powers are the key drivers and shapers of regional order and architecture\textsuperscript{56}—Germany and France in Europe with the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Union (EU), America in North America with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), or Brazil and Argentina in South America with Mercosur—it is not the great powers but ASEAN which has led the way in building East Asian regional cooperation.\textsuperscript{57} A second conception of ASEAN centrality is to understand ASEAN in terms of its contribution to East Asia’s stability and security as the region’s convenor or facilitator through providing an assortment of multilateral mechanisms—


‘meeting places’—which bring together great powers, regional powers, and small and/or weak states in East Asia for regular consultation and confidence-building. Arguably, ASEAN’s menu of modalities has also helped to facilitate the institutionalization of relations between China and the United States, the most crucial bilateral relationship in international security today in the view of many. On the other hand, it has been argued that ‘ASEAN’s central role as East Asia and the Asia-Pacific’s regional convener has not been matched by ASEAN regional leadership’. ASEAN’s insistence on remaining neutral is a bone of contention for its critics, who argue that the organization ought to take a stance on key concerns such as the South China Sea disputes. If anything, ASEAN’s very weakness, seen as a bane by critics, has equally been a boon in terms of making it the default regional leader by virtue of the mutual strategic distrust among the great powers. As Amitav Acharya has argued:

The major powers of Asia do not trust each other enough to develop a Concert of Powers, instead these powers, including US and China, have accepted ASEAN’s centrality in the regional security architecture. But ASEAN will be doomed if it loses its unity and takes sides with one great power against another. So ASEAN will need to provide the role of honest, neutral broker particularly when the great powers do not trust each other.61

Viewing ASEAN as the hub and/or prime node of Asia’s regional architecture is a third way to understand centrality. Arguing that ASEAN’s engagement with the wider regional groupings it has helped spawned has less been about wanting to lead and drive them than avoiding being marginalized by their more powerful non-ASEAN stakeholders, it has been suggested that it is far more accurate to speak of ASEAN as the hub—or, as former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has it, ‘fulcrum’—of East Asia’s regional architecture than as its leader.63 Another way to think about this is in terms of ‘nodes’. According to Caballero-Anthony, social network theory emphasizes the place of particular nodes in networks and their relations with other nodes.64 This is best conceptualized by way of the image of overlapping concentric circles of memberships of various regional institutions in Asia, where ASEAN is more often than not pictured as the common point where all those circles intersect and converge. So too, it could be said, the position of ASEAN within each wider regional grouping, which purportedly allows

59 Tan, Facilitating China-U.S. Relations in the Age of Rebalancing: ASEAN’s ‘Middle Power’ Diplomacy.
ASEAN to dictate the shape and substance of each grouping. ‘Despite its lack of material power’, as Caballero-Anthony concluded, ‘ASEAN has been able to claim centrality because of its position as a node in a cluster of networks, and this condition of “high between-ness” allows ASEAN to exercise influence in regional processes with the tacit acceptance of the major powers’.65 A fourth way to understand ASEAN centrality emphasizes the need for ASEAN member states to take seriously the implementation of the stated aims and plans in the organization’s concords and roadmaps. In tacit agreement with the criticism that ASEAN-led regionalism is all process and devoid of progress,66 former ASEAN officials like Sundram Pushpanathan have argued that, ‘To maintain ASEAN’s centrality in the region and to achieve the goal of AEC [ASEAN Economic Community] by 2015 it is imperative that ASEAN shifts aggressively towards “result-based regionalism”’.67 Finally, a fifth and considerably more negative way of understanding ASEAN Centrality is see it as about maintaining ASEAN’s pride of place and little else by way of substance—‘clinging to the driver’s seat’, according to one formulation.68 Here the perceived concern has to do with ASEAN doing what is required to ensure it does not become a marginal actor in a region full of big powers.

Against this backdrop, is ASEAN at all central in and to defence regionalization in East Asia, and if so how? As we have seen in the earlier sections, a considerable number of regional defence initiatives do not include ASEAN even if a number of its member countries and their militaries might be participants. Is ASEAN’s putative centrality lessened as a result? Arguably, this is a moot point since—as this paper has shown—at no instance in its history has ASEAN ever aspired to be a defence actor or be seen as one. In this sense, ASEAN has little if any formal connection to the proliferation of bilateral defence engagements, much in the same way as extant alliances and collective defence arrangements, even ASEAN and the FPDA share a number of similar security concerns (not least the collective desire to ensure that the genie of Indonesian militarism and expansionism is kept well corked in the bottle of regional frameworks and agreements). If at all, its contribution to security in East Asia has essentially been normative.69

Where centrality, in the first instance discussed above, is understood in terms of ASEAN’s purported leadership of the region, it has been recognized, by realist analysts (for whom great powers, not small, matter most) no less, that ASEAN’s primus inter pares (first among equals) position in the ARF as a ‘structural flaw’70—an anomaly that flies in the face of conventional wisdom on regional order and power, where the world’s most powerful nations have volitionally deferred to a grouping of developing nations where deciding the diplomatic-security agenda and convention of the Asia-wide security institution are concerned. As Evelyn Goh has noted,

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‘ASEAN’s vital contribution to regional order was in persuading the great powers to commit to a supplementary supporting structure of multilateral confidence-building at a critical juncture of strategic transition after the Cold War ended’. Be that as it may, it is also ASEAN’s apparent inability—whether by dint of its inherent weakness or its disunity and incoherence, or both—to broker great power consensus that has led to the ARF turning moribund. ‘Increasingly’, as Goh has also noted, ‘ASEAN’s approach to enmeshing the great powers in regional multilateral institutions may be out-dated, as it cannot help to bring about the negotiation of modus vivendi among the great powers themselves so necessary to managing regional stability over the medium- to long-term’. Yet where the ARF has seemingly failed to engender great power consensus, the ADMM-Plus seems a whole lot less dysfunctional in this regard, possibly because it emphasizes functional interstate cooperation in areas where that consensus does exist.

The key role ASEAN has played as the region’s convenor cum facilitator for the institutionalized meetings among East Asian countries has been critical. Yet as the preceding discussion has shown, the readiness of other players to convene regional gatherings that attract world and regional defence leaders—the IISS’s SLD in Singapore being the prime example—has raised questions about ASEAN’s relevance in this regard. For example, in the debate between two pundits over US Secretary of Defense Panetta’s statements on the US rebalancing strategy at the 2012 SLD, tacit allusions over whether the SLD or the ADMM-Plus was the more ‘relevant’ forum emerged. The effort in 2008 by former Australian leader Kevin Rudd to promote an alternative regional architecture—one not centred on ASEAN, at least according to the preliminary versions of his ‘Asia-Pacific Community’ idea—also served as an implicit challenge to ASEAN centrality as understood in this manner. However, according to veteran Singapore diplomat Tommy Koh, the neutrality of ASEAN is a key reason why the regional institution is ‘acceptable to all’:

For the past two decades, ASEAN has taken the initiative to bring these key powers, as well as other regional countries, together in various ASEAN-centred institutions and forums. The objective has been to develop mutual confidence, to reduce mutual suspicions, to deepen economic linkages and to nurture a culture of cooperation. **ASEAN is acceptable to all the stakeholders as the region’s convenor and facilitator because it is neutral, pragmatic and welcoming.**

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71 Evelyn Goh, ‘ASEAN-led Multilateralism and Regional Order: The Great Power Bargain Deficit’, _The Asan Forum (Special Forum)_ (accessed 7 October 2014); Ralph A. Cossa, ‘US 1, China 0’, _PacNet_, No. 6, 6 June 2012; Josh Rogin, ‘Why didn’t the Chinese show up for Shangri-la?’, _Foreign Policy_, 1 June 2012; Carlyle A. Thayer, ‘Shangri-La Dialogue: The Ghost of China Past’, _Thayer Consultancy Brief_, 2 June 2012; Carlyle A. Thayer, ‘Shangri-La Dialogue-The Ghost of China Past’ (accessed 7 October 2014);


Nor is it evident that ASEAN, according to the third interpretation of ASEAN centrality offered above, necessarily a hub or node of defence regionalization. On the one hand, given ASEAN’s stewardship of regional institutions that focus on regional defence and security—ARF, ADMM-Plus, EAS—it makes good sense to see ASEAN, as did Hillary Clinton, as a fulcrum of East Asia’s evolving regional security architecture. On the other hand, that there are other defence webs in the region not connected to ASEAN implies that the latter is at best a hub/node but not necessarily the key one in East Asian security, particularly if regional leaders persist in seeing (and perhaps dismissing) ASEAN-based institutions as ‘talk shops’ of limited relevance to the real questions of traditional or ‘hard’ security concerns. That being said, it is interesting to note Japanese leader Shinzo Abe’s use of the 2014 SLD to advance the EAS as the place to promote the need for mutual military transparency and defence confidence-building among East Asian states.

Regarding the fourth conception of ASEAN centrality—the need for ASEAN to prove itself as a results-oriented organization—there is no question ASEAN faces an uphill task here. That ASEAN officials past and present who highlight this issue have focused their remarks solely on the AEC project—to the exclusion of the APSC and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) projects, even though these also share the same 2015 deadline as the AEC—is, in a tragic sense, a silent but no less powerful indictment of the absence of progress on those latter fronts. Even then, most if not all observers—including the former secretary-general of ASEAN, Surin Pitsuwan—have effectively ruled out the AEC making significant headway by 2015. Yet the fact that ASEAN has had to endure challenges to its leadership, as evidenced by the Rudd proposal and other efforts, suggests the region’s loss of confidence in ASEAN centrality. For instance, it has been argued that great powers ‘continue to pay increasingly superficial homage to the ASEAN process, all the while knowing that ASEAN’s insistence on consensus decision-making too easily leads to paralysis’. Indeed, many hold privately to the view (as discussed above) that ASEAN centrality—notwithstanding their own public support for it—is but an expedient device used by ASEAN to keep its privileged—increasingly undeserved, in the view of many—place and role in regional architecture for as long as it can do so. However, the silver lining here could well be the hitherto relative success of the ADMM-Plus and the hopes many regional leaders have pinned on the EAS.

Conclusion

As an organization that has formally rejected collective defence as its raison d’être, that ASEAN has historically wielded a measure of influence over regional security architectures and conventions in East Asia is rather astounding. But whether this influence can rightly be regarded as constituting centrality, or something close to it, is considerably less evident for the reasons—at least some of them—discussed above. As a grouping of relatively weak states that, with the

blessing of the big powers, has had the temerity to walk among giants, ASEAN’s achievements are by no means small or insignificant. Increasingly unable to forge consensus among great powers on regional security, ASEAN has sought, not without some success, to carve a niche in the area of non-traditional security cooperation. As we have seen, regional changes have proceeded so far apace that ASEAN, with all the limitations that beset it, might not be able to keep up with despite its best efforts. Yet the inability of the great powers to establish among themselves the requisite modus vivendi that ASEAN increasingly finds so difficult to forge might well prove the justification for the continuing relevance of ASEAN’s centrality.