ASEAN community : trusting thy neighbour

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The ASEAN Community:Trusting Thy Neighbour?

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As ASEAN pursues its vision of a single community, the trust factor within the region remains unexplored. Based on two ASEAN-wide surveys, this analysis suggests that Southeast Asian peoples and elites have not yet satisfied the requisite levels of trust necessary for an 'ASEAN Community'. Moreover, the frequency of interaction throughout the region has not strongly influenced the level of trust in each of the ASEAN member-states.

CHALLENGES SUCH as the haze, SARS, and transnational crime in Myanmar have all served as recent reminders of the increasing interdependence of regional security. ASEAN has responded to these 'comprehensive security' threats through a commitment to establish an ASEAN community with its own political, economic, and socio-cultural identity by 2015. To assess the feasibility of this goal, the author conducted two separate sets of surveys throughout the region. The first survey was tailored towards the region's elite (including academics and government officers) and involved 100 participants. The second asked a simpler set of questions in seven languages and involved 819 participants from all the capital cities except Yangon. During the past two and a half years, the author also conducted interviews in all the ASEAN member-states. While the surveys provided insights on several issues, this analysis focuses on the trust factor at the levels of the people and the elite of the region, along with the impact of interaction and regional knowledge on such perceptions of trust. The perceptions of trust is of fundamental importance to ASEAN as it is difficult to imagine the existence of an 'ASEAN Community' in the absence of adequate trust among the people and the elite of Southeast Asia, which influence the extent of trust between and among member states.

A long way to go?

Notwithstanding the quest for an ASEAN Community, trust remains a major problem in Southeast Asia. While 37.5% of the grassroots respondents said that they could trust all the countries in Southeast Asia to be 'good neighbours', 36.1% were 'unsure' and 26.4% answered 'no' to the question. As indicated in Figure 1, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei are the three countries with the highest percentages for 'trust'. In the context of the 'no' response percentages, the three most *distrusting* countries were Myanmar, Singapore and Indonesia. However, the responses from the region's elite were the most disconcerting. When forced to provide only a 'yes' or 'no' answer to the question of 'trust', 59.8% of the elites surveyed said they could not trust other countries in Southeast Asia to be 'good neighbours'. Furthermore, when the sample was split between government officers and academics it was the academics that were the most cynical: 66.7% of them answered 'no' to the question of trust while 55.3% of government respondents answered 'no' to the same question.
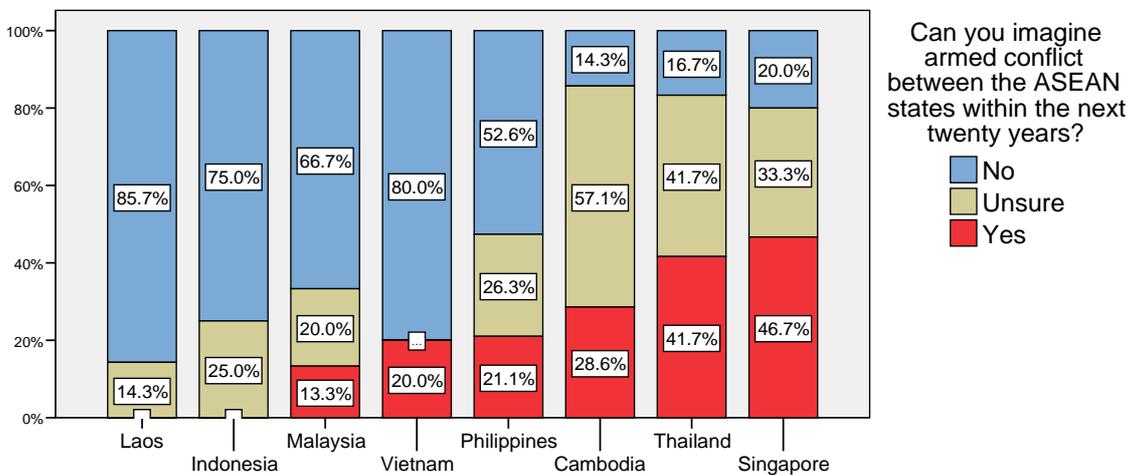

Figure 1. Grassroots Trust in Southeast Asia
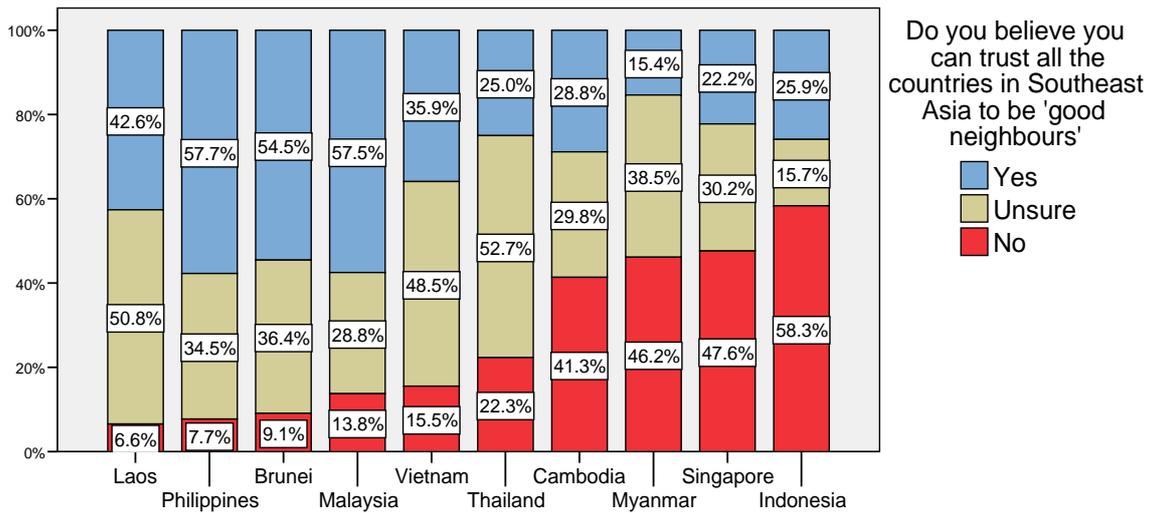
On the Risk of Conflict

The elite survey contained a further question associated with trust. It asked the survey participants if there were any circumstances where they could envisage armed conflict between two or more ASEAN states. While half the participants (50%) responded 'no', 22.3% responded 'yes' and a further 26.7% were 'unsure'. Further, the chart below (Figure 2) outlines the percentages on the same question based on citizenship. It is interesting to note that the respondents from Cambodia (28.6%), Thailand (41.7%), and Singapore (46.7%) perceived the highest risk of conflict.

Figure 2. Elite Perceptions over the Risk of Conflict in Southeast Asia

To better understand the potential factors influencing 'expressions' of trust in Southeast Asia, the grassroots survey also questioned the participants about their knowledge of ASEAN and the region. It investigated the frequency and nature of international interaction. One question asked the participants to select the category that best described their knowledge of ASEAN. A positive result was that 52.1% of respondents believed they either held a 'very good' or 'reasonable' knowledge of ASEAN. Of the remaining respondents, 38.4% indicated that they did not really know what ASEAN does and 8.3% stated that they had never heard of the Association prior to the survey. Interestingly, the countries with the highest frequency of response for the category 'they understood ASEAN reasonably well' were Indonesia (52.3%), the Philippines (54.2%), and, somewhat surprisingly, Laos (41.9%), and Vietnam (53.3%).

Role of media and extended family

Two questions examined how often the respondents read the newspaper or watched television news. Figure 3 shows the percentage of respondents who do so 'usually on a daily basis'. Interestingly, these figures do not seem to indicate a significant correlation with the level of trust in the region. For example, despite the Indonesian respondents indicating a relatively high level of exposure to the region's media, Figure 1 also demonstrated that they were among the most distrusting respondents.

Figure 3. Television News and Newspaper Readership Patterns
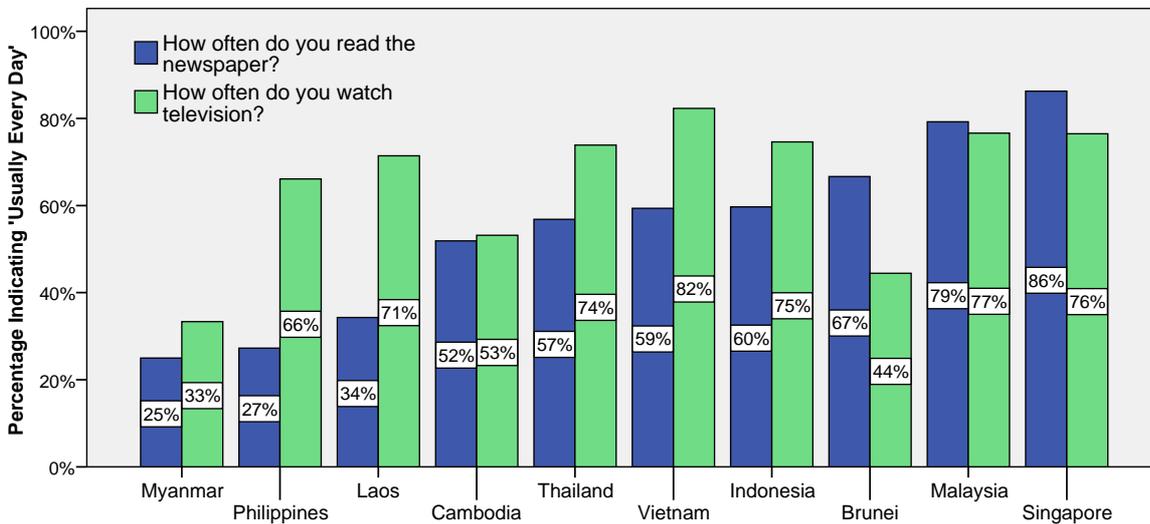
To another set of questions, 51.2% of the grassroots respondents indicated that they had family in other ASEAN countries and 49.6% indicated they had friends in other ASEAN countries. Again, there was little correlation with 'trust'. For example, and despite some of the highest 'yes' response rates coming from both the Filipinos and Singaporeans, the Singaporeans were among the most distrusting, with nearly half the elites believing that armed conflict was possible, while only 21.1% of Filipino elites imagined such a possibility. Further, only 7.7% of the Filipino respondents indicated that they did not trust all the Southeast Asian countries to be good neighbours. Thus, while both the Filipino and Singaporean respondents had relatively significant interaction with the region, they sat at opposite ends of the spectrum in regard to trust.

Trust and International Exposure

Other questions in the survey examined the frequency of international travel: 49.3% of the respondents indicated they had previously travelled to another ASEAN country. Of the respondents who had travelled internationally, 37.8% (18.63% of the total sample) indicated that they would usually travel at least annually. Nonetheless, for those who had only conducted international travel '1-5 times' in their life, the sample indicated that the most infrequent travellers were from Malaysia (66%), Cambodia (68%), Indonesia (69%), Thailand (72%), and Vietnam (76%). Again, there appears to be an inconsistent correlation (if at all) between the indicators of 'trust' and the current frequency of international travel.

In the case of both Thailand and Indonesia for example, the low frequency of interaction corresponds with a relatively higher level of distrust. However, Malaysians also indicated a low frequency of travel but they maintained one of the best response rates for 'trust'. The Singaporeans indicated that they are among the most frequent international travellers (98.4% had travelled internationally) but they simultaneously represented the second highest category for 'distrust'.

The surveys also seem to negate the notion that increased interaction and knowledge within Southeast Asia should positively affect the level of regional trust and thus reinforce the creation of a regionwide identity. In other words, it is not necessarily true that the more you interact, or the more you know about the region, the greater the level of trust and the stronger the regional identity. However, it is

important to note that this analysis has been limited to the 'frequency' of interaction with little regard to the 'quality' of interaction.

In reality, the region's media and political elite continue to sensationalise and scapegoat the behaviour and activities of communities and governments in other ASEAN states. The impact of such practices have been witnessed on a regular basis with examples including the destruction of the Thai embassy in Cambodia, anti-Chinese riots during the economic crisis in Indonesia, and popular reactions to the Sulawesi Sea dispute in 2005. Because of the nature of this 'negative interaction', it becomes possible to understand why the period of each country's membership in ASEAN has not (as yet) positively affected the extent of trust between the communities and the elite of Southeast Asia.

The Positives and Negatives

Despite these problems, two interpretations of the data remain possible. Relative to ASEAN's humble beginnings, the level of trust currently evident between the states and communities of Southeast Asia is a significant achievement. However, given the proposal to forge an ASEAN community by 2015, the level of trust and perceptions regarding the risk of conflict (in some ASEAN states) remains far short of satisfying ASEAN's own concept of a community -- a concept that if realised, would foster 'a regional identity', generate greater 'political and security cooperation', and 'ensure a durable peace'. To build more trust in the region, both policymakers and the media need to undertake – in rhetoric and in practice – a more significant transition towards the behaviour of a 'community'. Such behaviour would be manifested through greater displays of affinity, kinship, and reciprocity.

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