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THE ASEAN SECURITY COMMUNITY: Struggling with the details

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The 18th Asia Pacific Roundtable held in Kuala Lumpur (30 May to 2 June 2004) featured continuing discussion of the proposed ASEAN Security Community (ASC), as well as Indonesia's action plan to realise the ASC. The meeting revisited some of the issues and controversies that have emerged after the action plan was tabled at the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting in Yogyakarta last May.

Current State-of-Play

The ASC project is making slow progress because of the many issues and objections that the different ASEAN members have raised with regard to the action plan, which contains some 70 specific proposals and a timeline for implementation. Arguably the most controversial proposal calls for the establishment by 2012 of an ASEAN Peacekeeping Force that could be deployed to help resolve internal conflicts peacefully. The proposed peacekeeping force, as envisaged by Jakarta, would deploy neutral forces if conflict erupts in, say, Indonesia's own troubled Aceh province or in the southern Philippines. However, it is not clear whether the planned peacekeeping force would be deployed outside ASEAN.

In the Far Eastern Economic Review of 10 June 2004, Barry Wain reports that other points of contention included 'promotion of democracy and human rights, a commitment to free and regular elections, the untrammelled flow of information and the building of open, tolerant and transparent societies.' These proposals, combined with the idea of a regional peacekeeping force, have evoked objections by various ASEAN members.

In a nutshell, while ASEAN members are generally supportive of the ASC concept, (it was after all adopted by the Bali Summit in 2003), it is in the specific details and actual modalities of the ASC that objections and obstacles have arisen. Mr Wain in fact goes so far as to describe the other ASEAN members' response to Jakarta's action plan as 'a major foreign policy defeat for Indonesia.' While such hyperbole might be misplaced, the different responses to the action plan do underscore the difficulties that impede the ASC at both the conceptual and operational levels. As a participant at the APR put it, the problems arose principally because Indonesian diplomats had not taken the trouble to sound out their ASEAN colleagues beforehand, in particular on contentious issues like the regional peacekeeping force.

Countries' Reactions

From the start, there was already an acknowledgement on Indonesia's part that some of the initial ideas introduced were highly problematic. Dr. Rizal Sukma, author of the original ASC

concept paper, conceded in the Jakarta Post of 11 Dec 2003 that there was ‘a lack of clarity over ASC because Indonesia had not adequately explained the concept. This unclear message can be seen in the Declaration of Concord on the ASEAN Community [Bali Concord II], which has many contradictions and loopholes.’ Some of the ambiguities that Dr Sukma referred to would include issues such as norm-setting, conflict resolution and prevention, and making the non-intervention principle (generally regarded as the cornerstone of ASEAN) more flexible.

Rendering the non-intervention principle more flexible has in fact proven to be the key stumbling block in trying to move the ASC ahead. In essence, what has emerged is a ‘chicken-and-egg’ problem that runs like this: the non-intervention principle, which has served to maintain ASEAN solidarity since its creation, has become a hindrance and, all too often, a justification for inaction. The non-intervention principle has also hindered deeper cooperation on domestic matters that have transnational or regional effects. Furthermore, the principle also precludes the possibility, or at least makes it extremely difficult, for ASEAN members to ask fellow members for assistance on domestic problems that could spill over to the region. And yet, the retention of the non-intervention principle in the Bali Concord II was deemed vital in order not to destabilize ASEAN and to avoid alarming some of the newer members. Hence, while it has been recognised that the non-intervention principle needs to be reconsidered, it has proven extremely difficult to do so simply because of this very same principle.

Regional peacekeeping force

There have been widespread reservations about the regional peacekeeping force. Singapore’s Foreign Minister S Jayakumar argued in the Straits Times of 8 March 2004 that ASEAN was the ‘wrong entity to play a peacekeeping role’, re-emphasizing that ASEAN was not a security or defence organization.

In the same article, Vietnam’s Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien stated that it was ‘too early’ to consider establishing a peacekeeping force, and such a peacekeeping force would be fraught with difficulties because ‘each country has its own policy about politics and the military.’

Thailand’s Foreign Affairs Minister Surakiart Sathirathai also rejected the idea of a peacekeeping force. He was quoted by Indonesia’s Antara news agency on 24 Feb 04 as saying that it was unnecessary to form an ASEAN Peacekeeping Force because ‘there is no conflict in the region which would need the mobilisation of such a force.’

An Indonesian analyst has also pointed out potential pitfalls of the regional peacekeeping force. Mr Bantarto Bandoro, editor of the Indonesian Quarterly writing in the Jakarta Post on 2 Mar 2004, while arguing that it was timely to discuss the idea of an ASEAN Peacekeeping Force also conceded that ‘efforts to establish an ASEAN Peacekeeping Force may produce undesirable consequences.’ In particular, he highlighted the possibility that peacekeeping could be used as an excuse to carry out intervention.

The Philippines had, at the outset, expressed its concern that the ASC would replicate the failure of earlier regional security organizations. The Philippines’ then Foreign Minister Blas Ople recalled the failure of the US-sponsored Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), warning that it was important that the wider Asian community did not interpret the ASC as a case of ASEAN ‘ganging up against anybody’ (Straits Times, 21 July 2003). However, on the issue of the peacekeeping force, the Philippines might be more predisposed to discussing how

the concept could take shape, given its joint peacekeeping duties in Aceh with Thai forces and its experience of troop deployment to Cambodia under the United Nations umbrella. Indeed, at the recent APR forum, a former high-level Philippine security official said that a regional peacekeeping force was the logical manifestation of security cooperation among ASEAN states.

Malaysia has not issued any official pronouncement on the proposed ASEAN Peacekeeping Force. However, Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar's comments in Singapore's Business Times on 6 October 2003 are instructive: 'We [ASEAN Leaders] agree that it is not our goal to create a military bloc. Our focus for the ASEAN Security Community is on coming up with a caring society and human security.' He added that defence cooperation between members was on a bilateral basis and that such an issue should not be included in the ASC.

At the APR in KL, a senior Indonesian Foreign Ministry official avoided mention of the peacekeeping force in clarifying the proposal for conflict resolution in the action plan of the ASC, which the ASEAN SOM was developing. He said ASEAN 'may develop a regional mechanism or institution for conflict resolution. Some possible activities may cover strengthening dispute settlement mechanisms, *developing regional peace keeping arrangement*, and developing supporting institutions.' ASEAN, he added, was still working on detailing activities required to achieve the ASC through an orderly process of cooperation.

Conclusion

Two sets of concerns currently cloud the ASC. At the macro level, there is the lingering concern that the ASC could mutate into a formal defence arrangement. The extent to which this could halt or derail the ASC project depends on how and by how much the principle of non-intervention is rendered 'flexible', and how palatable the different ASEAN members would find such flexibility in interpreting the principle.

There have been suggestions that the ASC initiative constitutes an attempt by Indonesia to regain its pre-eminent position within ASEAN. Mr Wain writes that Indonesia's pursuit of the ASC was 'a blatant and unacceptable bid to reassert itself over the region', and that the other members have made it clear by rejecting the ASC action plan that 'they do not regard Indonesia as first among equals within ASEAN.'

However, the problems that have surfaced have more to do with the specifics of the ASC proposal, and less to do with it being energetically pursued by Indonesia, or that it is an attempt by Jakarta to reassert its primacy within the regional bloc. After all, the other ASEAN members have lived (and, for the most part, been comfortable) with Indonesian primacy right up to the regional economic crisis in 1997. Rather, the most serious problems have manifested themselves at the 'nuts and bolts' level of the ASC action plan.

In short, these problems and points of contention stem from having to reconcile the various action plan proposals with the long-standing principle of non-intervention. So while ASEAN members have endorsed the ASC through the Declaration of the Bali Concord II, it is the operational and implementation details that have been the most challenging. And while the ASEAN Peacekeeping Force is only one of many proposals, objections to it illustrate the difficulties of operationalising the ASC project. The devil, after all, is in the details.

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