

# Understanding ASEAN's centrality: bases and prospects in an evolving regional architecture

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**Abstract** There have been a number of articles about ASEAN's centrality in the regional security architecture of Asia. Yet, the notion of centrality remains undefined and under-operationalised. Implicit in the discourses of centrality is the idea of ASEAN's leadership, which in turn raises questions about ASEAN's ability to do so, given its limited capacity. This article defines ASEAN's centrality from the perspective of social network approach and argues that ASEAN's structural position in the density of networks that it has established and those that it has linkages with explains ASEAN's centrality. Despite its lack of material power, ASEAN has been able to claim centrality because of its position as a node in a cluster of networks, and this condition of 'high betweenness' allows ASEAN to exercise influence in regional processes with the tacit acceptance of major powers. However, while centrality may have been achieved, maintaining centrality in a rapidly changing regional environment compels ASEAN to address challenges to its centrality. This would necessarily include its ability to maintain consensus, carry out collective action and achieve its stated goals.

**Keywords** centrality; regional architecture; ASEAN Community; ASEAN Political–Security Community

## 1. Introduction

ASEAN's ability to manage peace and security in Southeast Asia is often deemed as a key achievement of its 46-year history. This achievement has helped ASEAN's role in initiating the establishment of many ASEAN-led regional institutions in the wider region of Asia Pacific and has spurred ASEAN's decision to deepen regional integration and work towards an ASEAN Community by 2015.

The Community that ASEAN has envisioned is founded on three pillars: the ASEAN Political–Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic

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Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). The three-pillared Community would realise ASEAN's vision of a region where: (1) the people and member states of ASEAN will 'live in peace with one another and with the world at large in a just, democratic and harmonious environment' (APSC); (2) there will be 'a single market and production base' that is 'more dynamic and competitive' (AEC); and (3) there will exist an 'ASEAN Community that is people-centred and socially responsible' through 'forging a common identity and building a caring and sharing society which is inclusive and harmonious' (ASCC) (ASEAN Secretariat 2009).

The overarching goal of establishing an ASEAN Community has attracted significant interest from within and outside the Southeast Asian region. The developments in ASEAN have catapulted the grouping to a prominent position in the international community. This heightened profile has been depicted as 'ASEAN centrality'.

In 2011 alone, a number of statements were made about ASEAN's new, elevated position on the international stage. Perhaps among the most persuasive of such statements was the remark by former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (2011), who described ASEAN as 'the fulcrum of an evolving regional architecture'. Academics and analysts have also iterated ASEAN's centrality. An Australian analyst, Malcolm Cook (2011), asserted that with the United States and Russia joining the East Asia Summit (EAS), 'ASEAN's claim to its centrality in East Asian and Asia Pacific regionalism is confirmed'. Cook (2011) added that 'the future for formal regional institutions that are not based in and originated from ASEAN is bleak'. Within Southeast Asia, regional leaders, analysts and commentators had echoed similar sentiments. The head of a Singaporean think tank, Simon Tay, in evaluating the kinds of meetings ASEAN had been convening over the years, noted that 'the group [has] moved from neutrality to centrality'. President of Indonesia Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono went further, declaring at the conclusion of the 19th ASEAN Summit held in Bali, Indonesia (ASEAN Secretariat 2011b), that 'ASEAN's centrality has been maintained'. It is interesting to note that despite all these pronouncements, none has operationalised what exactly is ASEAN centrality. Similarly, a brief survey of recently published work that mentioned ASEAN centrality also does not offer an explanation of what centrality means (Pomfret 2013; Rolls 2012; Tan 2011, 2012).

Implicit, however, in the oft-heard refrain of centrality is the widening and intensification of ASEAN's leadership role in East Asian regionalism. Does centrality mean leadership? If so, such assumption points to several salient questions about ASEAN's relations vis-à-vis its external partners. Among these are: (1) whether ASEAN, as a group of small powers, does indeed have the ability to lead the wider Asia Pacific region which includes the major global powers (the United States, China, Japan and Russia); and (2) whether ASEAN has the ability to influence the course of regionalism in the wider region, given its limited capacity and institutional constraints.

These questions are critical in unpacking the meaning of centrality as applied to ASEAN and its leadership role. Recent studies that have sought to operationalise ASEAN's leadership (Dent 2012; Jones 2010) have largely fallen short in explanatory force. Lee Jones' (2010) notion of leadership, for instance, is predicated mostly on the extent of ASEAN's influence over sub-regional and extra-regional events. Its ability to influence events, according to Jones, depends on the ability of ASEAN members to reach consensus and mobilise resources. This operationalisation, however, does not fully explain why, despite the obvious lack of resources commanded by this group of small states, the narrative about ASEAN's centrality is still very much in evidence. The lack of conceptual clarity often leads one to miss the fundamentals which led to centrality being ascribed to ASEAN in the first place.

Richard Stubbs' most recent work on ASEAN leadership provides a useful way of operationalising ASEAN's leadership (2014, this issue). In his essay, Stubbs defines ASEAN's leadership as an interactive process wherein [ASEAN], as 'a state or group of states in the international system in cooperation with follower states', is able to: (1) facilitate problem solving of an issue area; (2) lead the establishment of infrastructure for regional consultation; and (3) influence and/or shape the way issues are discussed.

The three elements outlined by Stubbs make for a good take-off point in unpacking the notion of centrality for this paper, but with the use of a different conceptual framework. The analysis here moves from theories of leadership to network analysis to explore ASEAN's central role as a function of its structural position in various networks. It draws on the concepts developed by scholars of social network analysis (SNA) to examine the extent to which ASEAN is able to show 'leadership' through its ability to influence 'followers' in achieving a common purpose, gain access to resources and information, and serve as a channel for transmission of beliefs and norms, and in the process, create structures that can 'define, enable or restrict behaviour' (Hafner-Burton, Kahler and Montgomery 2009, 562). In brief, the paper aims to define centrality through the SNA approach by showing how ASEAN's structural position as the node in the cluster of networks allows it to claim a central role in the region's institutional architecture that includes major powers.

The paper is therefore organised as follows. First, this paper discusses the conceptual underpinnings of 'centrality' using the SNA approach as the conceptual framework. Through the SNA, the paper argues that ASEAN's centrality is derived from its close and dense ties with other actors in the network of institutions in East Asian regionalism, and more importantly, from its position as a node bridging these different networks. In other words, it is ASEAN's structural position in the density of networks that it has established and those that it has linkages with which explains ASEAN's central role in Asian regionalism, despite its lack of material power. Second, the paper examines the extent to which ASEAN is able to

maintain its centrality as it continues to advance regionalism in Southeast Asia and the wider region. This is an important aspect to consider, given that most studies on social networks focus more on why networks are successful and give less attention to their weaknesses and constraints (Kahler 2009). In doing so, this paper therefore aims to extend the discussion beyond how centrality is attained to how it can be maintained. In the case of ASEAN, challenges to its centrality are its ability to maintain consensus, carry out collective action and achieve its stated goals. Finally, the paper concludes with some observations on the future directions of ASEAN and its centrality as it advances with its new and more advanced phase of regionalism with its adoption of the Declaration on ‘ASEAN Community in a Global Community of Nations’, or the Bali Concord III at the 19th ASEAN Summit in 2011 (ASEAN Secretariat 2011a).

## **2. Unpacking the conceptual underpinnings of centrality**

Leadership is often conceptualised in terms of power, though scholars differ in the significance they afford to different types of power. According to realists, it is material power that enables a state to exercise leadership and influence over other states, and which in turn defines the structure of international systems (Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990; Waltz 1979). Constructivist scholars like Alexander Wendt (1999) and Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall (2005), on the other hand, argue that it is the power of ideas rather than material power that defines the structure of international systems. To these scholars, ideational elements – norms, beliefs and identities – often have a far-reaching impact on the behaviour of states and on how the international system is structured. Constructivists also place a lot of emphasis on the role of norms in shaping the behaviour of states in the international system (Finnemore 1996, see also Acharya 2011).

From the above, one notes that the conceptualisation of leadership is often informed by the notion of power – both material and ideational. However, another way of examining leadership is through the notion of centrality offered by the SNA approach. Anne Marie Slaughter (2009) in her work on social networks puts forth this other view. She argues, persuasively, that in a networked century, power can no longer be measured in material terms as defined by the realist tradition (see also Slaughter 1997). According to Slaughter, ‘it is connectivity, more than money or stature, that determines power and power will increasingly be defined by connection – i.e. who is connected to whom and for what purposes’ (2009, 99). In a networked world, the issue is no longer about relative power but centrality – the position of being able to make connections in order to solve shared problems (Slaughter 2009, 112).

Within such a context, SNA offers a different perspective: it allows one to examine more closely the position of an actor within the power

structure, and how that position could shape international systems in significant ways. This paper applies SNA to the study of ASEAN, focusing in particular on the notion of centrality as developed within the SNA literature. Centrality was first introduced by Alex Bavelas in 1948. He hypothesised a relationship between structural centrality and influence in-group processes. Bavelas' work on centrality was subsequently taken up by other scholars.

Lindon Freeman in his 1979 article, 'Centrality in Social Networks', highlights the importance of centrality in understanding social networks. Freeman's work effectively aims to demonstrate how groups are organised to solve some kinds of problems and why SNA provides a framework for understanding how networks and processes work. According to Freeman, SNA is of particular value in international relations, in that it describes how international networks work and investigates the network effects on key international outcomes. In SNA, centrality is seen to indicate the social power of an actor (represented by a 'node') based on how well it connects, or how extensively it is connected, to the entire network. It has been used to explain differential performance of communication networks and network members on a host of variables, including problem solving, perception of leadership, efficiency and job satisfaction.

Stephen Borgatti and Martin Everett (2006) note that scholars have proposed different measures for centrality, including (potential for) autonomy, control, exposure, influence, belongingness, brokerage, independence and power. Freeman (1979) provides a simpler approach to measuring centrality based on three basic concepts: betweenness, closeness and degree. These elements are defined as follows:

- *Betweenness*: The extent to which a node lies between other nodes in the network. This measure takes into account the connectivity of the node's neighbours; nodes that bridge clusters are given higher values.
- *Closeness*: The degree to which an individual is near all other individuals in a network (directly or indirectly). It reflects the ability to access information through the 'grapevine' of network members.
- *Degree*: The count of the number of ties to other actors in the network.

Freeman's three elements of centrality have been seen a useful tool by scholars of international relations interested in analysing the relationship between power and networked politics. Like Slaughter, Miles Kahler, in his book *Networked Politics: Agency, Power, and Governance*, argues that power in networks 'depends on structural positions [of a node] in a field of connections to other agents, as well as actor capabilities or attributes' (Kahler 2009, 3). The relational structures within networks influence the actions of other nodes. Nodes that have high-betweenness centrality have high social capital and can act as a bridge, or broker, which allows them to gain influence. Similarly, nodes with high-degree centrality, that is, a high

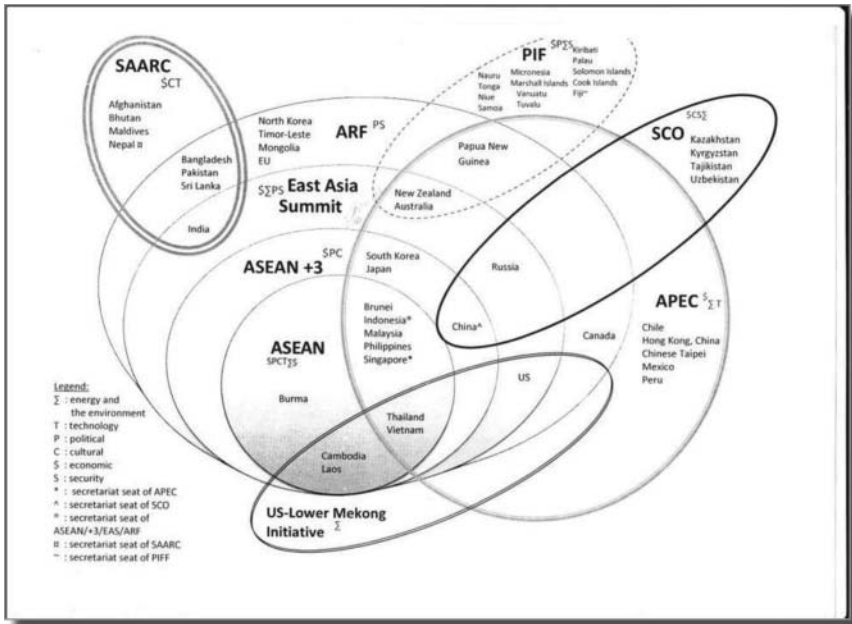


Figure 1 Visual representation of ASEAN ‘centrality’. *Source:* Asia Pacific Centre for Strategic Studies.

number of ties with other nodes, possess social powers that enable them to access resources and information from those nodes (Hafner-Burton, Kahler and Montgomery 2009, 658). Hence, centrality within the SNA approach provides us with a useful conceptual framework for understanding the notion of centrality as it applies to ASEAN. The centrality of ASEAN can be seen or depicted by its being in between, being closely connected to and being in a number of networks in the wider East Asian institutional landscape. ASEAN’s structural position in the dense web of networks, that is, its being at the centre and as a bridging node, can explain why ASEAN is seen as the driver of and a fulcrum for other regional institutions in Asia.

Figure 1 shows the application of SNA to the case of ASEAN and the place of ASEAN in the regional institutional architecture. ASEAN could be seen to measure highly on all three dimensions of betweenness, closeness and degree. As an organisation of small states, its betweenness, that is, its position as a bridging player or broker, is particularly significant. The strength of its betweenness is amply demonstrated through the various ASEAN-led institutions – the ASEAN Regional Forum, or ARF (1994); the Asia-Europe Meeting or ASEM (1996); the ASEAN Plus Three or APT (1997); and the East Asia Summit or EAS (2005).

## ***2.1. Pathways to ASEAN's centrality***

While the exercise of fleshing out the conceptual meaning of ASEAN centrality provides a useful framework for understanding its position in the regional institutional architecture, one needs to probe further how and why this grouping of small powers has been ascribed this role. Here, ASEAN's history as a regional organisation is pertinent. Since its establishment in 1967, in a political and security milieu characterised by great power rivalry and competition, ASEAN has carefully navigated the cockpit of great power competition by eschewing alliances and forms of defence arrangements. Instead, ASEAN assiduously crafted a path of cooperative security regimes with the aim of promoting trust, building confidence and encouraging inclusiveness. ASEAN's storyline over the past 46 years therefore shows a history of policies of engagement with like-minded, as well as non-like-minded, states.

ASEAN's stance was most visible in the post-Cold War era when it became one of the most ardent proponents of regional multilateralism. By promoting the norm of cooperative security, underscored by the cultivation of habits of dialogue, and observance of regional norms which include the respect for the principles of sovereignty, non-interference and peaceful settlement of disputes – reflected in the so-called ASEAN way, ASEAN has actively sought to develop more ties and create denser clusters of networks. This is best seen in its founding of the ARF.

Established in 1994, the ARF is Asia's first region-wide security institution. It brings together all the major powers (the United States, China, Japan and Russia), some middle powers (such as the European Union [EU], Canada and Korea) and small powers (such as the ASEAN member states).<sup>1</sup> As the convenor of this Forum, ASEAN has displayed its high-betweenness centrality. Also, by bringing together the major powers and middle powers in the ARF, ASEAN was able to establish its critical position between these clusters. By doing so, ASEAN therefore has been able to exercise its centrality, and appropriate the privilege of setting the agenda for the ARF and apply ASEAN practices in the conduct of ARF meetings and processes. The deliberate attempt by ASEAN to shape the institutional design of the ARF is indicative of the preference of ASEAN members that the ARF not be seen as some kind of superstructure that subsumes ASEAN or competes with it. But, what is unique to ASEAN's role in the founding of the ARF, and as with the other ASEAN-led institutions that followed it (the APT and the EAS), has been the 'tacit acceptance' of other members that it holds high centrality within the network. This explains why in the foundational years after the establishment of the ARF, ASEAN had already earned the position of being in the 'driver's seat'.

As argued by many, none of the major powers – China, India, Japan or the United States – would tolerate one of their number, or any other major

power, taking the lead in the region. The only viable alternative, one that is acceptable to all, was and still is ASEAN. As noted by a seasoned diplomat, ‘unlike the major powers, [ASEAN] is militarily weak, neutral and objective. . . it is strategically located, but is no threat to anyone’ (Kesavapany 2010). With these attributes, ASEAN, despite its lack of material power, has been able to build trust and confidence among network members. It is important to note that the ARF grew out of ASEAN’s relations with its 10 dialogue partners (Japan, South Korea, China, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Russia, the EU and India) whom ASEAN meets with annually during the Post-Ministerial Conferences (PMCs) held after the grouping’s annual post-ministerial meetings. With the institutionalised PMCs, it was easier for ASEAN to establish the ARF and later on expand to 27 members spanning a wide footprint in the Asia Pacific.

Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones (2008) consider trust-based relations to be a key feature of the political dynamics of networks. ASEAN has capitalised over the years on the level of trust it has developed with its extra-regional partners to persuade them to also accept its normative foundation of regional conduct, specifically the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and its principles (ASEAN Secretariat 1976). This pattern of relations and approach continued when ASEAN established the EAS in 2005. Getting China, Japan, India, Russia and the United States to accede to the TAC – a prerequisite to joining the EAS – underscored the centrality of ASEAN in the region’s multilateral institutions.

Over the years, ASEAN has also demonstrated its open and pragmatic outlook by its willingness to continually plug itself into the international community and getting others to join the various ASEAN-led networks. Its role as the first architect or builder of regional security community institutions in Asia has enhanced and reinforced its centrality. Higher betweenness allows it to act as a bridge between the ARF, APT and EAS, and to facilitate the access of one node (the EAS) to another (for example, the ARF). The increased closeness and degree centrality of ASEAN also enables it to leverage a wider range of intra-regional and extra-regional resources. In these networks, ASEAN’s centrality can be seen to be derived not only from its structural position, but also from its role/capability in shaping the norms that define regional institutions in Asia – particularly in the case of the EAS. This is explained further in the following section.

## ***2.2. ASEAN’s centrality in an evolving regional architecture***

At the ASEAN Summits since 2010, the ASEAN Leaders have underlined the need to maintain ASEAN centrality in architecture-building and institution-building in East Asia. This centrality, as articulated by the ASEAN Leaders, is about ensuring that regional processes and engagements are

coursed through and defined by ASEAN-led mechanisms. The most recent of these ASEAN-led mechanisms is the EAS. In fact, it is at the EAS where one can hear the loudest pronouncements and iteration of ASEAN centrality and where the dynamics of ASEAN centrality are more clearly played out.

If one were indeed to probe further the central role that ASEAN plays in the EAS and other ASEAN-led mechanisms, one notes two key elements. The first is in deciding the membership and composition of the EAS and the second is agenda-setting. These two elements reflect ASEAN's social power where, 'as actors with high degree centrality, [ASEAN] can withhold social benefits such as membership' (Hafner-Burton, Kahler and Montgomery 2009, 570).

When the EAS was established in 2005, there was much speculation as to why the EAS brought in countries outside the APT ambit. With the inclusion of India, Australia and New Zealand, ASEAN was seen as signalling to the international community that the grouping was ready to take on a wider leadership role in an expanded, albeit still limited, regional body. Unlike the ARF which in 2005 already had 27 members, the EAS configuration of the 10 ASEAN countries plus the three East Asian states (China, Japan and South Korea) plus another three nations (Australia, New Zealand and India) reflected a new power dynamic in the region. ASEAN's inclusion of a rising power like India, as well as an assertive Australia, was indicative of ASEAN's attempt to 'manage' the changing power dynamics in the region and to ward off potential for dominance or hegemony by China. Moreover, in establishing the EAS as a Leaders-led forum focused on wider strategic issues, ASEAN once again underscored its preferred approach of promoting multilateral cooperative security rather than competition.

Mindful that cooperative security in Asia to address regional challenges would require the inclusion of the big powers such as the United States and Russia, it was only a matter of time before the two countries were invited to join the EAS. However, the membership came with certain conditions, the most significant of which was the signing of ASEAN's TAC. Before 2010, there appeared to be much hesitation on the part of the United States to sign on to the TAC. For one thing, the United States had reservations about being tied to a regional treaty that eschews the use of force in settling disputes. Thus, the eventual signing of the TAC by the United States carried much symbolic significance, representing as it does a superpower being enmeshed in a normative security framework defined by a group of small and militarily weak states. What ASEAN has accomplished in the TAC-isation of the EAS is the region-wide acceptance of its normative foundations of regional inter-state conduct, which in turn shapes the regional security order.

Also significant is the fact that the expanded EAS represents yet another layer in an increasingly dense web of multilateral institutions in Asia that

address different aspects of regional security and strategic issues, with ASEAN at the centre. ASEAN's centrality in this regard is reflected in its high level of inter-connectedness, particularly in its betweenness and closeness, with the major players in the regional and global arenas.

The second element of ASEAN's centrality in the evolving regional architecture is ASEAN's role in agenda-setting. Once again, the case of the EAS is instructive. The Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the EAS in 2005 outlined the principles of the EAS as a Leaders-led forum for dialogue on broad strategic, political and economic issues of common interest and concern. Based on these principles, members agreed at the grouping's inaugural Summit that cooperation would focus on five key areas: energy, finance, disaster management, avian influenza and education.

In the run-up to the 6th EAS in November 2011, it became clear that the agenda could no longer be confined to the five areas originally agreed on. While ASEAN is generally cautious when faced with attempts by new members to widen the agenda beyond non-traditional security issues to also include maritime security and non-proliferation, it also realised that it had to be responsive to the changes in the region's strategic environment. In the end, following a year-long discussion, the Chairman's Statement at the 6th EAS clearly indicated that ASEAN had to find a way to accommodate the interests of its new members. What emerged from the Chairman's Statement was an agenda that was no longer limited to non-traditional security threats, and which included strategic geopolitical issues of common interest such as maritime security (ASEAN Secretariat 2011c). Nonetheless, given its role as the Chair of the EAS, ASEAN's centrality was already evident in its ability to steer the expansion of the EAS agenda in response to the changing strategic landscape of the region.

That ASEAN has been able to play a central role through its deftly structured network of institutions and having positioned itself as the node – in terms of its betweenness, closeness and degree – be it the ASEAN Plus One, APT, ARF or EAS further allowed ASEAN to initiate regional agendas and strategies that stamped its imprint. Thus, ASEAN's centrality is a result of its skilful diplomacy nurtured through the years.

To remain in this position, ASEAN would have to steer the region with initiatives, ideas and proposals to address emerging regional and international security challenges, including non-traditional threats such as pandemics, natural disasters and potential economic downturns. In this regard, maintaining centrality also means being in a position to lead in solving shared security problems. At least in 2011, one can observe that ASEAN had in fact been at the forefront in addressing regional challenges. ASEAN's centrality was demonstrated when Indonesia, the ASEAN Chair for 2011, initiated the Special ASEAN–Japan Ministerial Meeting at the ASEAN Secretariat on 9 April 2011 to coordinate assistance for relief and recovery efforts, and medium- to long-term rehabilitation and reconstruction plans for Japan in the wake of the country's earthquake and tsunami

disaster. The ASEAN Foreign Ministers requested that the ASEAN Secretary-General work closely with member states and report to the Leaders on their efforts.

In response to the Cambodia–Thailand border dispute of 2011, ASEAN initiated shuttle diplomacy to manage the problem, which led to an ASEAN Special Foreign Ministers’ Meeting. These efforts were welcomed by the UN Security Council, which recognised the critical role of regional organisations in regional conflicts. This unprecedented initiative by ASEAN raised the profile of the grouping. The challenge now is for ASEAN to demonstrate that it can sustain this role and this requires no less than an enhanced institutional capacity for the grouping to carry out its multiple programmes and activities.

### ***2.3. Centrality within ASEAN***

The emphasis of ASEAN’s centrality is not limited to ASEAN’s place vis-à-vis its external partners in the evolving regional architecture. Indeed, the notion of centrality is also very much a part of the discourse that takes place within ASEAN itself. During the 18th ASEAN Summit held in Jakarta, Indonesia, in May 2011, ASEAN Leaders underlined the need for the grouping to maintain its centrality in institution-building within ASEAN as this will serve as the fundamental building block for a strong ASEAN Community. At the conclusion of the 19th ASEAN Summit and its Related Summits in 2011, the ASEAN Chair (ASEAN Secretariat 2011b) reported that there is ‘recognition from the Leaders on ASEAN’s centrality in building East Asia regional architecture’.

To unpack the notion of centrality *within* ASEAN, there is a need to expand the analysis and consider the ASEAN member states themselves as nodes in the network.<sup>2</sup> According to SNA literature, the nature and patterns of association among nodes create the kind of structure that can define, enable or restrict the behaviour of those nodes. What this implies is that the ties among its member states define what ASEAN is able to do. In this regard, closeness and degree centrality among all nodes (member states) is highly salient, as such centrality creates conditions for increased cohesiveness among all member states, which in turn strengthens the ability of ASEAN to gain access to resources, set the agenda, frame debates and craft policies that benefit its member states (Beckfield 2003, cited in Hafner-Burton, Kahler and Montgomery 2009, 570).

A rapidly changing strategic environment has brought on more uncertainties in ASEAN. As security, economic and development issues transcend borders, ASEAN’s cohesiveness has become more critical than ever to its members. Compounding such concerns are moves by bigger countries to establish alternative regional institutions. ASEAN saw the versions of the Asia Pacific Community proposed by Australia’s Kevin Rudd and

Japan's Yukio Hatoyama as a challenge to its coveted position in the regional landscape. Those proposals compelled ASEAN members to strive to strengthen their collective resilience and commitment to ASEAN centrality. In an environment riven by competition, fears of great power influence and abandonment often surface, making it imperative for ASEAN to coordinate its efforts as it continues to engage, lock-in and enmesh the major powers in its regionally led frameworks. On this front, ASEAN appears to have made significant progress. In 2010 alone, a number of ASEAN-initiated frameworks emerged. Notable among these was the convening of the first ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Plus, which brought together the Ministers of ASEAN states and their counterparts from Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia and the United States.

ASEAN has also continued to deepen relations with its 10 dialogue partners, namely Australia, Canada, China, Japan, South Korea, India, New Zealand, Russia, the United States and the EU. The grouping holds bilateral Summits between ASEAN Leaders and the Leader of each of its dialogue partners at the sidelines of each ASEAN Summit. There are also annual meetings and summits that deal with economic and security issues.<sup>3</sup> The dense web of networks and meetings covering political, economic and security issues reflects the extent of ASEAN's betweenness. These networks illustrate ASEAN's position as a critical 'boundary spanner' in the international system. [Figure 2](#) further illustrates the nodal function of ASEAN in the ASEAN-led mechanisms.

Over the last two years (2010–2012), ASEAN has worked on strengthening its relations with the United Nations, as well as actively engaging other regional organisations such as the Organization of American States, the African Union, the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Economic Cooperation Council and the Mercosur. ASEAN has also welcomed the increasing interest of the global community in fostering closer relations with ASEAN, as manifested in the growing number of non-ASEAN states appointing Ambassadors to ASEAN. As of November 2011, there were a total of 62 non-ASEAN Ambassadors. There is also the growing interest from international entities such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the World Bank and others to have formal relations with ASEAN through memorandums of understanding. Thus, the makings of the internal network within ASEAN itself also explain why ASEAN is able to maintain its central role in Asia Pacific regionalism.

### **3. Maintaining ASEAN centrality**

The value of the SNA in the study of ASEAN centrality extends beyond explaining why ASEAN's structural position allows it to play a central role or facilitates its 'leadership' in East Asian regionalism. While SNA helps



Figure 2 ASEAN and its mechanisms.

examine the ability of the network to increase their power by enhancing and exploiting their network positions, it also allows one to examine its weaknesses. Although the latter has been given less attention in SNA studies (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones 2008; Hafner-Burton, Kahler and Montgomery 2009), a closer look at the possible weaknesses and constraints of the network allows for a better assessment of the network power of ASEAN. As noted by Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones, although networks' strengths are their scalability, adaptability and resilience – properties that define ASEAN, networks can also suffer from inefficiencies, that is, lack of capacity for collective action, maintaining consensus and ability to achieve their states' goals. The latter issues are equally critical to avoid the pitfalls of exaggerating the centrality of ASEAN.

Ironically, ASEAN's success has increased the pressure on ASEAN to maintain its centrality. As former ASEAN Secretary-General Dr Surin Pitsuwan argues, the grouping now needs to demonstrate the substance of its centrality, underscoring the need for ASEAN to transcend perceptions that it is merely a convener of multilateral meetings. If ASEAN were to continue to set the agenda of regional institutions, it is expected that there have to be credible and substantive strides in the regional mechanisms that it has established. To ASEAN Leaders and its political elites, maintaining

centrality requires no less than a two-pronged approach – starting with strengthening centrality within ASEAN, followed by maintaining its centrality within the dense cluster of networks in the regional arena.

### ***3.1. Building and maintaining centrality from within***

Against a rapidly changing regional environment, an agenda that is gaining greater salience within ASEAN is how to achieve its strategic priorities of building an open, dynamic and resilient ASEAN Community. In this regard, it has been recognised that ASEAN needs to strengthen the basics to ensure that ASEAN continues to be the cornerstone of the foreign policies of its member states.

Within ASEAN, the task at hand is to demonstrate its effectiveness at solving problems and promulgating policies that benefit its member states. Currently, this applies to realising the goals of the ASEAN Community as set out under its three pillars. In the APSC, for instance, ASEAN needs to make more progress towards becoming a rules-based organisation, with the ASEAN Charter as the foundation, while at the same time upholding the fundamental principles, values and norms of ASEAN. When ASEAN finally adopted the ASEAN Charter in 2007, 40 years after its founding, the Charter was seen as a watershed for regionalism in Southeast Asia.

There are at least three significant implications of ASEAN's adoption and subsequent ratification of the Charter. First, the Charter confers ASEAN a legal personality. It provides a legal framework for incorporating ASEAN decisions, treaties and conventions into the national legislation of member countries. Second, the Charter sets out a framework for institutional accountability as well as a compliance system (Caballero-Anthony 2008). As Singapore's Koh, Woon, Tan, and Sze-Wei (2007) point out, the Charter provides ASEAN with 'a new culture of adherence to rule... a culture of taking our obligations seriously... a system of compliance monitoring and, most importantly, a system of compulsory dispute settlement for noncompliance that will apply to all ASEAN agreements'. Third, by having a Charter that spells out clearly the grouping's institutional norms and values, member states have effectively committed themselves to the promotion of democracy, protection of human rights and human security. These developments reflect an ASEAN that has been and is undergoing a normative transformation and which is bent on becoming a serious player in the future of the Asia Pacific region.

However, six years on, the aim of a convergence of norms and values such as democracy among ASEAN states with different political systems has yet to be fully realised. This demonstrates the underlying lack of consensus and coherence in policies within ASEAN. The slow progress could compromise claims of ASEAN's centrality. As one diplomat pointed out, can ASEAN in fact earn its place at the region's core without a certain

degree of convergence not only in interests but also in values? (Kesavapany 2010)

The challenges are clearly huge in a highly diverse ASEAN and the results after the adoption of the Charter are still mixed. In the promotion of democracy and human rights, ASEAN has made significant progress, with the establishment of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) in 2009 and the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) in 2010. The year 2012 also saw ASEAN finally adopting the ASEAN Declaration on Human Rights. Yet some would argue that many ASEAN member states are still not signatories to the major international convention on human rights.

Then again, Myanmar has seen dramatic political changes, starting with the elections in November 2010. Within a year, Myanmar transformed from being a pariah state – a military regime known for having one of the worst records of human rights violations – to a democratic state with a civilian leader and a national parliament. The April 2012 by-elections saw the opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), win 43 of the 44 seats it contested (out of the 45 up for grabs). Its leader, opposition icon Daw Aung Sang Suu Kyi, won a parliamentary seat. Moreover, Myanmar is now getting ready to be the ASEAN Chair in 2014. The country is finally taking its turn, after having passed over its Chairmanship to the Philippines in 2008 following a series of violent demonstrations in 2007 known as the Saffron Revolution.

The country's rapid political transition has clearly taken the world, and Myanmar's own neighbours, by surprise. Myanmar's neighbours had for years patiently and quietly tried to persuade Yangon to address what at that time seemed like an intractable political impasse, pitting a disempowered political opposition against a strong, seemingly resilient military regime. With these changes, it appears that the normative landscape of ASEAN is slowly being shaped along the lines set out by the Charter. In brief, these developments demonstrate the social power of the regional network to influence, albeit very slowly, the behaviour of a member node. One could also argue that by keeping Myanmar within the association, ASEAN has brokered the continued link of Yangon to wider regional networks, thus allowing Myanmar – through ASEAN's high betweenness – to benefit from the range of resources made available to and accessed by ASEAN (Caballero-Anthony 2014). Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak noted that ASEAN, by acting as a broker to assist Myanmar at the aftermath of the humanitarian crisis caused by cyclone Nargis, has helped to widen the space for and quicken the pace of political reforms in Myanmar (Razak 2012).

To meet the goals of maintaining peace and security in Southeast Asia and beyond, the ASEAN Charter calls on ASEAN and its member states to act in accordance with several principles, including 'shared commitment

and collective responsibility in enhancing regional peace, security and prosperity' and 'enhanced consultations on matters seriously affecting the common interest of ASEAN'.<sup>4</sup> To this end, the APSC Blueprint, formally adopted at the 14th ASEAN Summit in 2009, devotes an entire section to conflict resolution. The Blueprint calls for the strengthening of existing mechanisms for the settlement of disputes, and for *additional mechanisms* as needed to be considered. It also urges the development of ASEAN modalities for good offices, conciliation and mediation.

ASEAN's mechanism for dispute resolution was put to the test during the Cambodia–Thailand border dispute in February 2011. The 'shuttle diplomacy' undertaken by the ASEAN Chair to stop the military skirmishes between Cambodian and Thai troops and the convening of the ASEAN Special Foreign Ministers' Meeting on 22 February 2011 in Jakarta to discuss the dispute were certainly a breakthrough. Equally significant was the UN Security Council's decision on 14 February 2011 (prior to the Special ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting) that expressed support for ASEAN's efforts and encouraged the disputing parties to continue to cooperate with the regional organisation. ASEAN should now take advantage of the momentum created by its efforts during this dispute to take steps to ensure that it is not found wanting in the event that it faces a similar situation in the future. Although an ASEAN Institute of Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR) has been set up in 2012, progress in defining its work has been slow and appears to be hampered by the differences among member states on the mandate of the AIPR.

An enhanced ASEAN capacity for maintaining regional peace and security is also important if ASEAN aims to contribute and respond to key global issues of common interest and concern. This vision was articulated by Indonesia during its Chairmanship of ASEAN in 2011 when it adopted the theme 'ASEAN Community in a Global Community on Nations'. An important element in this vision is ASEAN's endeavour to have a common platform on global issues by the year 2022. According to the Indonesian Chair, this would require a more coordinated, cohesive and coherent ASEAN position on key issues that is based on a shared ASEAN global view. A common platform would in turn further enhance ASEAN's common voice in relevant multilateral fora.

No sooner had this idea found traction than ASEAN found themselves in disarray over the handling of the South China Sea disputes. At the 20th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting held in July 2012, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, ASEAN Foreign Ministers failed to issue a joint communiqué – the first time in the grouping's 45-year history. Despite efforts by Indonesia to convince Cambodia, which was then the Chair to reflect the discussions on the South China Sea, Cambodia refused to do so. Media reports suggested that China had a hand in influencing Cambodia and undermining ASEAN's effort to expedite the drafting of the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea (Bower 2012; Philippine Daily Inquirer, 15 July 2012). ASEAN

officials acknowledged that the incident had a negative impact on ASEAN's credibility and underscored deep divisions among the 10 members on how conflicting territorial claims are dealt within the regional framework (*Today*, 14 July 2012). Singapore Foreign Minister K. Shanmugam cogently captured the impact of the event when he said: 'We talk about ASEAN centrality, ASEAN neutrality, ASEAN community, but before all that, is the central issue of credibility' (*Today*, 14 July 2012). Soon after the meeting, ASEAN officials went into damage-control mode. With Indonesia's shuttle diplomacy, ASEAN Foreign Ministers announced ASEAN's Six Point Principles on the South China Sea. Among others, the statement allayed concerns that ASEAN cannot reach a common position on the issue (*Manila Times*, 21 July 2012; *Vietnam News Agency*, 20 July 2012).

Indeed, while maintaining ASEAN centrality is undergirded by a politically cohesive and strategically coherent ASEAN, of equal and critical importance also is an ASEAN that is economically strong and robust. ASEAN is already an emerging market of over 598 million people, with a combined gross domestic product of US\$ 1.8 trillion (at current prices) in 2010. The region has so far enjoyed robust economic performance and resilience. In 2010, ASEAN economies expanded by 7.5% despite the shadow of the 2008 global economic crisis.

ASEAN has identified hurdles to the realisation of the AEC and taken action to address them. It is working to attract more investment, to facilitate free flow of skilled labour, and to set up or strengthen a national coordinating agency in each member state to effectively coordinate implementation across various ministries and agencies. Since the adoption of the AEC Blueprint in 2007, ASEAN has redoubled its efforts to expedite the implementation of measures that would lead to the realisation of the AEC. As of July 2011, ASEAN implemented 73.4% of the measures under the Blueprint. It has completed two of the four implementation phases planned for the run-up to the 2015 target for the AEC, with modest progress seen (ASEAN Secretariat Information Paper 2011).

Notwithstanding these modest achievements, there is shared recognition that unless ASEAN has made significant progress in narrowing the region's development gap, the notion of ASEAN centrality among its own member states may not be fully appreciated. Narrowing the development divide is a strategic priority for ASEAN, and a key programme to address this is the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Work Plan (Mahani 2013). Another significant step taken by ASEAN to deepen economic integration is the adoption of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC). The MPAC identifies key strategies and actions to enhance connectivity in the region, both within and outside of Southeast Asia, in terms of three dimensions: physical, institutional and people-to-people linkages. Despite these programmes, ASEAN officials acknowledge that much more needs to be done to significantly bridge and reduce the development disparities across

the region and ensure that the fruits of integration are evenly spread. All these initiatives require collective will and ability to push through with the stated goals.

From the discussion, it is clear that much more needs to be done to achieve ASEAN's goals of establishing an economically vibrant and politically stable and secure Southeast Asia, and these are just two of the three key pillars that need to be strengthened for the ASEAN Community to be fully realised. Importantly, realising the APSC and the AEC would be critical if the notion of ASEAN's centrality is to be widely shared by the people of the region. As noted by one observer, 'If ASEAN wants to be the glue for enduring architecture in Asia, it must be strong and integrated. Like the foundation of a building, if ASEAN is weak [internally], regional structures built on the principle of ASEAN centrality will be weak' (Bower 2010).

#### ***4. Conclusion: ASEAN centrality in Bali Concord III and beyond***

The Bali Concord III, the latest ASEAN road map, in outlining the strategies to strengthen the three pillars of the ASEAN Community, emphasised once again the need for ASEAN to address challenges through concerted efforts. In the APSC Blueprint, mention was made of the need to bolster cooperation on issues such as conflict resolution, transnational crimes, maritime security and nuclear proliferation. As part of ASEAN's goal of becoming an integrated economic community by 2015, the Leaders of ASEAN called for the adoption of region-wide production standards, increased openness and technological progress, improvements in access, diversification of energy sources and technological advances in agricultural production for food security. On the sociocultural side, more focus was given to deeper collaboration on natural disaster relief and assistance, managing the impact of climate change and ensuring health security. A key highlight in this area is the establishment of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre).

The elements emphasised in the Bali Concord III reflect the resolve of ASEAN to assume a leading role in efforts to deal with increasing regional and global challenges. The resolve appears to bring more initiatives, which also means the broadening of the agenda. The question, however, is the extent to which ASEAN can deliver. While ASEAN continues to receive strong affirmation of its centrality from its dialogue partners, which includes major and middle powers, it also knows that it has to be able to demonstrate its ability to retain this role. To this end, it becomes even more critical for ASEAN, in moving forward to a more advanced phase of regionalism, to adopt a more decisive approach to its commitments to the building of the ASEAN Community. ASEAN will have to continually

develop sufficient weight to constitute a credible bloc, within which members begin to adopt a common stand on key issues. This also means that ASEAN cannot afford to have a repeat of what happened in Phnom Penh in 2012.

On the economic front, this would mean recording meaningful targets in realising the ASEAN Economic Community by 2015 and beyond.<sup>5</sup> Closely related to this is also the role of a strengthened ASEAN Secretariat to help implement and coordinate the slew of regional initiatives.

The discussions in the paper have attempted to unpack the notion of ASEAN centrality using the SNA framework. Within the framework, ASEAN's centrality is understood as the structural position of a major node [ASEAN], in its attempts to get itself widely connected to and embedded in a density of networks. As ASEAN finds itself at the centre of the East Asian or wider networks of regional institutions, it is all the more vital for ASEAN to maintain its centrality, in order to protect and promote the collective interests of its members.

In conclusion, an understanding of ASEAN centrality – in its various manifestations, including driving the agenda, convening meetings that bring together all the significant players in the region, and forming a significant bloc in regional multilateral processes – involves an appreciation of the structural position of ASEAN in a network of networks. Importantly, however, ASEAN's centrality has to be understood in terms of its significance in amplifying the capability of ASEAN to influence and shape the regional environment and the regional order. With influence comes leadership, and in making this leadership effective, ASEAN clearly needs to work harder to build its own institutional capacity. This ultimately requires a combination of political will and considerable investment.

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## **Notes**

1. Since its founding in 1994, the ARF has grown from the original 21 member states (which include the 10 ASEAN states) to 27 countries. Its geographic footprint has extended beyond Asia to North America, Europe and the Pacific.
2. In SNA, nodes can either be individual states or corporate actors such as organisations (Hafner-Burton, Kahler and Montgomery 2009, 562).
3. In the economic sphere, aside from the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA), which came into force in 2002, efforts are also underway to realise the East Asia Free Trade Agreement (EAFTA), which will bring together the 10 ASEAN states with Japan, China and South Korea. There are also plans to establish the Comprehensive Economic Partnership in East Asia (CEPEA),

which will extend the membership of the 10 ASEAN members with Japan, China and South Korea to include India, Australia and New Zealand.

4. See Article 2 of the ASEAN Charter.
5. At the 21st ASEAN Summit, the idea of establishing a bigger economic grouping called the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) was announced. The objective of the RCEP is to form one of the world's largest free trade bloc comprising the ASEAN 10 and six countries that have FTAs with ASEAN – China, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

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