THE STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF ASEAN

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One is bound to come to a dead end in the search of a precise definition or identity of ASEAN or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which now comprises six countries, namely Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Often regarded primarily as an economic regional cooperation, the fact remains that in spite of the high economic growth of the group, one of the highest in the world, closer economic relations exist between the individual member countries of ASEAN on the one hand and major external powers on the other on a bilateral basis, especially the United States, Japan, and western Europe than between themselves. Thus it seems that the high economic growth of the group and their intense economic activities have little to do with ASEAN regional cooperation.

Indeed, it took almost a decade since its establishment in 1967 before ASEAN, at its first summit meeting in Bali in February 1976, undertook to carry out common economic projects. But this is by no means a success story of ASEAN. Nor are most attempts since then at economic cooperation in the ASEAN regional framework. Competitiveness rather than complementarity is a well-known characteristic of the ASEAN economies.

Likewise, theorists of regional integration would point to a conspicuous lack of movement in the direction of integration. And strategists fail to see any sign of defence or security cooperation within the framework of ASEAN. In fact, it has become more or less an article of faith within ASEAN that it is not, and never will be, a defence regional cooperation or a military alliance.
Indeed, ASEAN is in a sense unique. As a regional cooperation it is ill-defined in its nature. It is the argument of this paper, however, that ASEAN is partly, if not basically, a security cooperation. And it has a strategic significance in the sense that it has a long-term strategy for the creation and maintenance of peace and security not only of the ASEAN member states but for the region of Southeast Asia as a whole. And the peace and security of the Southeast Asian region will certainly be a contribution to the peace and security of the world at large.

CONSIDERATION OF SECURITY

ASEAN spokesmen often take pains to explain that ASEAN is never intended to become a military alliance in the model of the now defunct SEATO. This is to reassure those who fear or suspect such an implication. It is also to convince those who may entertain hopes and expectations for precisely the opposite lest they be disillusioned. Indeed, no evidence is to be found in any ASEAN documents of an intention ultimately to develop the association into the formation of a military alliance.

Nevertheless, however paradoxical it may sound, security concern forms an important part of the considerations for the establishment of ASEAN in 1967. The founding Bangkok Declaration of August 1967 says, among other things, that the ASEAN member states are “determined to ensure their stability and security from external interference in any form or manifestation in order to preserve their national identities in accordance with the ideals and aspirations of their peoples.”

An examination of ASEAN’s major documents will reveal that rejection of external interference has been a major preoccupation of the ASEAN states. The Kuala Lumpur Declaration of 1971 signed by ASEAN Foreign Ministers, which was in effect a statement of the association’s long-term strategy for Southeast Asia, may be regarded as an attempt to give a formal expression to that preoccupation. Thus reiterating the commitment of the ASEAN
member states to that very same principle as stated in the Bangkok Declaration, and recognizing that “the right of every state, large or small, to lead its national existence free from outside interference in its internal affairs as this interference will adversely affect its freedom, independence and integrity,” the Kuala Lumpur Declaration states that the member states of ASEAN “are determined to exert initially necessary efforts to secure the recognition of, and respect for, Southeast Asia as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality, free from any form or manner of interference by outside powers.” And both the rejection on outside interference and the principle of Southeast Asia as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) as its formal formula have been reaffirmed in the Declaration of ASEAN Concord as well as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, both of which were signed at the Bali Summit of 1976.

ASEAN concern with the threat of external interference is to be understood in the light of the region’s experience in the years immediately as well as accompanying its establishment in 1967. In the first place, the establishment of ASEAN is to be seen against the background of Indonesia’s conflict with Malaysia in the pursuit of its so-called policy of confrontation adopted by the Sukarno regime. It was an intra-regional conflict that had invited the increasing presence and role of great powers in the region. That is to say, it had provided an opportunity for great power intervention.

In the second place, at the time ASEAN was established, the Vietnam war, in one sense an intra-regional conflict and in another a domestic conflict, was nearing the peak of escalation. Though outside the region of ASEAN proper, it was another intra-regional conflict in Southeast Asia that had implications of external intervention.

There is no doubt that the continuation and escalation of hostilities in Vietnam at that time were consequent upon the engagement and intervention of those mutually antagonistic great
powers in the conflict, which had then developed in part into a projection of their own antagonism. And given the continued antagonism among the great powers and the geographic proximity of ASEAN member states to Vietnam, it is not difficult to understand ASEAN's concern over the continued involvement and intervention of the great powers in the conflict for fear of its escalation into a great-power confrontation that might eventually entangle them.

Internal Sources of Threat

External interference, however, is encouraged not only by intra-regional conflicts. It is also encouraged by internal conflicts that have beset the nations of Southeast Asia since the end of the Pacific war. And under the pretext of assisting their respective protagonists external powers have intervened in such internal conflicts to serve their own strategic and foreign policy interests.

All ASEAN member states have been afflicted, at one time or another, by internal conflicts in the form of subversion. This common experience has produced another common perception of threat among the ASEAN member nations to their security, which refers to the threat posed by subversion. It is a common perception recognised in the Declaration of ASEAN Concord, which says that "Each member state resolves to eliminate threats posed by subversion to its stability . . . ."

To say that the ASEAN states share a common perception of threat to their security posed by subversion, however, does not necessarily mean that such a perception of threat is the only one that prevails among them. Differences among the ASEAN member states in their perception of threats have not been unknown since the birth of the association. They have been reflected in their divergent approaches for problems of national security. They account for the fact that while Indonesia, for instance, has from the very beginning opted for an independent and active
foreign policy, others have chosen an alliance, in one way or another, with a great power. In part they also account for the fact that a formal security or defence arrangement within the framework of ASEAN regional cooperation has never been seriously considered.

Since the emergence of the Kampuchean conflict following the Vietnamese invasion in 1978-79, difference in the basic strategic outlook among ASEAN member states have again come to the fore. They underlie the divergent views within ASEAN on the way to manage relations with Vietman and with the major powers, and thus on the approach to the Kampuchean problem.

However, such differences do not necessarily imply the negation of the Bali consensus on the perception of threat posed by subversion. Among different basic national perceptions, the perception of threat to the security of ASEAN collectively as well as individually as one of a mixture of internal, intra-regional and external sources in the sense discussed above continues to be common among the ASEAN states, which binds them together.

**External Sources of Threat**

To varying degrees, the ASEAN member states also subscribe to the perception of an external threat to their security in the form of an open and direct military attack or invasion. However, a perception of threat in such a form is precisely an area of differences and disagreements among ASEAN member states, with which they do not deal collectively within the framework of regional cooperation. It did not form part of the consideration for the establishment of the association. It has resulted from differences in such factors as national history, tradition, geographic position, socio-cultural and economic backgrounds.

As discussed above, however, the ASEAN states do commonly perceive of external sources of threat to their security. On the basis of ASEAN’s common security concern that constituted a major consideration for the establishment of the association, an external power may be a potential source of external threat to the
extent that it may constitute a source of external interference. In particular, an external power may be a potential source of external threat to the extent that it may serve as an external source of support for subversive and insurgent elements within the individual ASEAN states or for their protagonists in an intra-regional conflict among them.

Even here, however, given the common perception of a certain external power as a source of indirect external threat in the sense of external interference rather than direct military attack or invasion, ASEAN states differ somewhat in their assessment of the urgency of such a threat. And again, such differences are to be appreciated in the light of the different historical backgrounds, geopolitical positions, traditions, social, economic and political developments, as well as national priorities of the ASEAN states.

Responses to Threats

Given the security concern that formed a major part of the motivation for the establishment of ASEAN, the first and most important form of response on the part of the countries that now comprise its membership to what they commonly perceive as a major source of threat to their security, namely, external interference, was the very establishment of the association itself. Against the background of Indonesia's confrontation against Malaysia as mentioned before, the establishment of ASEAN served as evidence and assurance on the part of Indonesia under the New Order regime, whose first major foreign policy action had been to bring an end to that policy of confrontation pursued by the Old Order regime, of its good faith and commitment to a good-neighbour policy.

Thus for the other member nations of ASEAN, particularly those that had been the targets of its policy of confrontation, Indonesia's membership in ASEAN would minimise the possibility of threat to their security posed by their bigger and stronger neighbour. In other words, within ASEAN Indonesia would be rendered less harmful and dangerous.
Indeed, the establishment of ASEAN may be regarded as a cosummation of the peaceful settlement of an intra-regional dispute, the confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia. By fostering unity and solidarity through regional cooperation in various fields within the framework of ASEAN, the member states will attempt to prevent, contain, and by peaceful means solve any further intra-regional conflicts among themselves. In so doing they will be able to avoid any possible external interference that may threaten their security. This is a principle laid down in the Declaration of ASEAN Concord that “Member states, in the spirit of ASEAN solidarity, shall rely exclusively on peaceful processes in the settlement of intra-regional differences”, a principle reaffirmed, re-emphasised, and spelled out more fully in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. This, in effect, means that ASEAN is heading towards the creation of some kind of a security community, or in the words of the Declaration of ASEAN Concord, a “Strong ASEAN Community” or a “Prosperous and Peaceful Community of South-East Asian Nations”, an objective to be achieved by ASEAN as enunciated by the Bangkok Declaration. It is with that end in view that a part of the programme of action in the political field adopted by the Declaration of ASEAN Concord is one for the “strengthening of political solidarity by promoting harmonisation of views, coordinating position and, where possible and desirable, taking common actions.”

To the extent that ASEAN is, as stated in the Bangkok Declaration, “open for participation to all states in the South-east Asian region”, the establishment of a strong, peaceful, and prosperous community will be more secure and stable if it should extend to cover the region of Southeast Asia as a whole. Hence the ASEAN’s proposal of the concept of ZOPFAN, a formula to give full expression to the basic principle of ASEAN regionalism and to its principal security concern, to be applied to the region of Southeast Asia as a whole.
CONCLUSION

Conscious of their own weaknesses and limitations, the ASEAN states cannot help being nationally and regionally rather than globally oriented in their strategic and security thinking. Barring a direct superpower confrontation, the best alternative for the ASEAN states to secure their stability is to put their own houses in order founded on national resilience.

The development of the national resilience of each of the ASEAN member states will combine, if still vaguely defined, to promote the development of ASEAN regional resilience. If national resilience ensures internal peace and stability, regional resilience would ensure regional peace and stability, and both levels of resilience would ensure security from external interference. And if rejection of external interference is the basic principle underlying the idea of ZOPFAN, then its realisation is to be founded, above all, upon both national and regional resilience.