

Chapter 3

The ASEAN Power

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It is taken for granted that the major countries have dominant status in the international community, while the minor ones have little influence. It is certainly assumed that they have more power than the minor countries. But this assumption often blinds us to the fact that small countries also seek to acquire and exploit power. In what kind of situations can such countries give the impression of playing on the same stage as the major powers? One answer is that they can acquire disproportionate power when they create a new kind of power resource and demonstrate that they can use this resource consistently to facilitate the emergence of a new world order.

This chapter analyses this contention by using the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) after the Cold War as a case study.

ASEAN power

ASEAN suffered the strike of the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis, and it experienced a low tide in the final years of the last century. But in the new century, along with the revival of the ASEAN member states' economies, ASEAN's regional status and function advanced incessantly. It has made great progress in the fields of its integration process, the East Asia cooperation process and the strategy of balance of powers, which have made the world view it with new eyes, with some scholars even contending that ASEAN is becoming the centre of power in East Asia.¹ There are four concrete representations of this burgeoning power.

First, ASEAN is changing the traditional cognition towards the ownership of power. As we still keep to the old idea that the Southeast Asia region is the arena where the big powers struggle to acquire a sphere of influence, ASEAN's strategy of balancing big powers has been in operation, with Singapore and Vietnam as the most conspicuous examples. The United States and Japan are 'jealous' that China's influence is increasing in the Southeast Asia region, so they constantly offer more 'carrots' to ASEAN member countries. For example, if a big power wants to join the East Asia Summit (EAS), a regional cooperation network created by ASEAN to avoid becoming a marginal player in the competition to shape community-building in the region, it has to achieve the

qualifications set by ASEAN; for example, it has to join the *Treaty of Amity and Cooperation* (TAC). Because the United States is reluctant to join the TAC, it cannot become a member of the EAS.² Russia, on the other hand, has joined the TAC, but has also been refused entry into the EAS on the grounds that trade relations between the two sides remain relatively modest. ASEAN has achieved dominant status in the collective game with big powers.

Second, ASEAN is changing the traditional understanding about how countries seek to advance their interests. Generally speaking, the economic cooperation theory considers that when a large state and a small state are in the process of establishing a bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA), the larger one usually exerts its power to protect its economic interests, while the smaller one opens its market passively. The larger one becomes the axle country and gains more benefit by establishing FTAs with several small ones, which become the spoke countries and benefit less. For example, the United States intends to expand the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to the whole American continent, and its aim is to realise its institutional hegemony in the American continent. While people still keep to the old idea of these countries seeking to protect and advance their interests, ASEAN actually bypassed the China-Japan nexus a decade ago, and created the East Asia cooperation framework including China, Japan and South Korea. These three nations recognise and support ASEAN's dominant and leading role and they are willing to accept ASEAN as the foundation of the future East Asia Economic Community through three ASEAN Plus One groupings (ASEAN plus China, ASEAN plus Japan and ASEAN plus South Korea), all with their respective FTAs. So, in the aspect of mechanism design, ASEAN becomes the axle country which gets more benefit, while the big countries become the spoke countries. ASEAN gets the dominant power as it seeks to protect and advance its interests.

Third, ASEAN is changing the traditional understanding about a country that seeks security. In the Cold War era, there were ceaseless wars in the Indochina peninsula which were not caused by ASEAN member countries. However, the old members of ASEAN, while there was no conflict between them, often had very strained relations. Since the Cold War, the steady expansion of ASEAN has finally extended peace to the whole of Southeast Asia. The ASEAN member states think that the traditional security threats come from the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. This ASEAN perception is the biggest motivating source pushing ASEAN's implementation of the strategy of balancing big powers. And this idea of ASEAN is also the main reason that ASEAN hopes that the Asia-Pacific big powers will, one by one, join the TAC, whose tenet is to resolve conflicts through peaceful means. In the past, larger powers always forced the small countries to sign peace treaties, while today larger powers join the TAC on their own initiative to give security assurances to the smaller nations.

Furthermore, ASEAN has demonstrated that it is receptive to the concept of 'human security' and of the need to think as a community of states in advancing this dimension of security. In the face of the transnational non-traditional security threats, these states are more fragile, their own national capacity is more obviously insufficient, and they urgently need regional and international cooperation. But they also worry more about the erosion of their national sovereignty. So the ASEAN states are making great efforts to seek the balancing-point among the national, regional and international community. ASEAN's preparedness to think more boldly about the absolutist conception of sovereignty and to take some initiatives that challenge it have also been a source of respect and, thus, power.

Fourth, ASEAN is changing the understanding of international norms. If we were to select the most engaging international norms in history, two strong candidates would be the 'peaceful co-existence' idea formulated during the Cold War era and the 'win-win' idea in the globalisation era. ASEAN members have realised peaceful co-existence among themselves, and now they are making a great effort to achieve 'win-win' outcomes with external powers. In their own region, ASEAN countries have found it impossible not to let the major powers win, which is the maximal reality in international politics and is also the original intention of its foreign strategy design. The tenet of ASEAN states is to realise a regional win: the small countries must seek independence, survival, development and might among big powers, which is the maximal reality of regional politics. From this point of view, ASEAN (whose *leitmotiv* is to seek to avoid conflicts and to seek common understanding) can gradually foster regional consciousness internally and also cautiously deal with the major powers externally. When ASEAN establishes the regional norms, it also creates the international norms, and the major powers are willing to abide by these international norms.

So, ASEAN is a power emerging in the region of East Asia.

Origins of ASEAN power

Where does ASEAN's new kind of power come from? And how has it been created? Its power mainly comes from the ASEAN organisation, its dominant role in the process of East Asia Cooperation, the balancing role it has played among big powers, and the norms it has helped to entrench.

The organisational power

The leaders of ASEAN states profoundly realise that only by pushing their integration rapidly and effectively can they strengthen their own competitive ability. For the 40-year history of ASEAN, its integration has generally been perceived by people as being rapid but not very effective. Four restricting factors are: (1) the new generation of leaders' relative lack of personal prestige and

fascination compared to the old leaders such as Suharto, Lee Kuan Yew, and Mahathir. Most of the current leaders are locked into domestic affairs and relatively lack the enterprise and rallying point of pushing the integration; (2) ASEAN members have not yet formed a better coordinating mechanism—they still lack the common understanding and implementing ability in important strategic and security issues due, for example, to the Myanmar issue, increases in their own domestic divergences, and increases in the centrifugal trend; (3) ASEAN's economic integration might seem to have more benefits on paper, but this may not necessarily be more effective. Some ASEAN members are engaged in signing bilateral FTAs with outside regional powers, which may be causing Southeast Asia's economic integration process to slow; and (4) the society and civilians of every country lack a sufficient degree of identity towards ASEAN. The leaders of ASEAN member countries realise that the concept of ASEAN needs to be in the deep part of people's hearts, not simply just in the hearts of the bureaucracy and the elite classes. Civilians should be infused with a sense of belonging to ASEAN, so that a feeling of unification and related attitudes can take root.

So, at the end of 2003, at a milestone meeting, the leaders of ASEAN member states decided that they would build ASEAN as three communities: economic, security, and social and cultural. At the January 2007 ASEAN Cebu Summit, they decided to build the ASEAN Economic Community by 2015, ahead of schedule by five years and, at the same time, they passed the *ASEAN Charter Report* and started the constituting process of an *ASEAN Charter*. The above measures relate to the long-term blueprint, the institution-building, and cooperation in concrete fields respectively, in which there are four layers of deep meaning.

The first meaning is to ensure the development of Southeast Asia. If the ASEAN member states want to dominate this region, where major powers have struggled for dominance in the past, they have to realise 'united self-mightiness' based on national 'self-mightiness'. Every country keeps its own traditional characters at the same time it accelerates modernisation—this is 'self-mightiness'. Then every country makes use of ASEAN to develop collective power—this is 'united self-mightiness'. These two ways move forward together and support each other. This process was identified after the Second World War. Since the 1990s, ASEAN has begun to accelerate the integration process incessantly. At first it accelerated the process of ASEAN FTAs, and now it is beginning to accelerate the process of ASEAN community building.

The second meaning is to consolidate the power foundation of ASEAN. ASEAN has made great efforts to develop this foundation since the end of the Cold War in 1991. It has developed and implemented the strategy of balancing big powers and it has dominated the regional cooperation process in East Asia.

No single country of ASEAN could play such a role. It follows, of course, that the degree of ASEAN integration directly influences the sustainable development of its power.

The third meaning is to deal with the new challenges internally and externally. The 40-year process of ASEAN development has been a process of adjustment to deal with emerging challenges arising from internal and external transformations. Today, Asian structural changes caused by the rise of China and India, the non-traditional and transnational security problems such as terrorism, the Myanmar issue and other internal indigestion problems are evidence that ASEAN needs to further coordinate its internal relations and develop ways to resolve all these problems. Some out-moded principles and ways may be abandoned, while some new principles and ways that fit the new situations need affirmation and implementation. The advice given by the ASEAN Celebrity Group to the *ASEAN Charter* reflects this trend. The purpose of constituting the *ASEAN Charter* is to transform ASEAN from a loose organisation to one that is founded on certain legal mechanisms.

The fourth meaning is to strengthen the building of ASEAN's capacity to lead. In recent years, voices doubting and blaming ASEAN's leadership ability have been heard continually. If ASEAN wants to be a long-term leader, it needs to improve its ability to resolve its own problems (such as Myanmar); its coordinating ability to handle the relations of ASEAN, ASEAN Plus One, ASEAN Plus Three (APT), and ASEAN Plus Six groupings adeptly; and its ability to make long-term strategy, keep strategic initiative and creativity, continue to play a greater role among major powers, and avoid being marginalised.

From this point of view, it would be better to say that ASEAN is enduring the feeling of crisis caused by power, rather than to say it is enjoying the glory of power. This is the original driving force of the ASEAN integration process. This process shoulders so many missions that it directly relates to the destiny and future of East Asia cooperation. So it remains the right choice for China, Japan, South Korea and other East Asia big powers to continue to support the building of ASEAN integration, and to continue to support ASEAN as the driver of East Asia cooperation.

The dominant power

The question of who will be the dominant power in the process of East Asia cooperation is the perennial focus of debate. A dominant power means some country or organisation which plays the dominant role and has the ability to design the direction, manage the process, and coordinate the relations for East Asian cooperation. According to this standard, the dominant power of East Asian cooperation could take four possible forms.

The first possibility is that China and Japan will dominate together. According to the experience whereby France and Germany played the dominant role in the European Union, some scholars suppose that, in the future, only China and Japan will have the ability to dominate the process of East Asia cooperation. If these two countries could go forward hand-in-hand, it would be East Asia's good fortune. But, since 1997, this possibility has not appeared; and as long as China-Japan relations cannot be improved, the chance of the two giants proceeding hand-in-hand is slim.

The second possibility is that China and Japan will struggle to be the dominant power. The developing trends of the two countries are very clear: China is rising to become a strong comprehensive power in East Asia, while Japan is developing to become a normal power in East Asia. Some experts think that the two regional powers both want to be the 'big brother' in East Asia and that the future will be characterised by structural confrontation and competition between the two sides. In regional cooperation, their competing relations are to struggle for the dominant power of East Asia cooperation. Such a possibility can do nothing but exacerbate the China-Japan conflicts and the strained atmosphere in East Asia, which could cause unease among Southeast Asian countries. Nor is it likely to attract US support, even if America's bigger worry is that its own hegemony in East Asia will be supplanted by Japan and China together.

The third possibility is that China and Japan will infiltrate the region to dominate it. Some scholars think that, on the issue of the dominant power concerning East Asia, China and Japan may change open strife to in-fighting. In this scenario, the two sides would seek to influence the East Asia cooperation process respectively through the Southeast Asian countries by having close relations with these countries separately. But this mode is complex and ineffective because of ASEAN's consensus principle.

The fourth possibility is that all East Asian countries publicly (together) push ASEAN to be the dominant power. If either China or Japan sought this role, it would encounter resistance from the other. So, ASEAN could be anointed as the best available entity acceptable to China, Japan and the United States, to drive East Asia cooperation.

ASEAN is always playing the roles of designer, pusher and organiser in the process of East Asian cooperation. It implements the strategy of balancing big powers and tries hard to be impartial among big powers. According to George Yeo, Singapore's Foreign Minister, 'we are not the potential competitor of big powers either'. The strength of ASEAN is inferior to the strength of China or Japan, so it is difficult to reach common understanding and become the regional leader. But ASEAN insists on pushing the cadence of East Asian cooperation according to the comfortable degree principle, and this is a fit for the diversity of East Asia. Even the United States, which wanders outside the East Asia

cooperation, also (according to former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice) thinks that ASEAN should be the leader of the East Asia Cooperation. Finally, India, Australia and New Zealand (all new members of the EAS) need ASEAN to coordinate relations.

The balancing power

After the end of the Cold War, ASEAN became aware that the one-power-dominant structure would not lead to regional stability and prosperity. Instead, in order to maintain these, ASEAN needed to develop a strategy to draw all the major powers into the region while it manoeuvred among them. The big powers would strengthen their strategic presence in the region, while simultaneously acting as a check and balance on each other. Obviously, ASEAN would be the biggest winner under this structure. For a long time, ASEAN has developed its bilateral relations with the major powers under the mechanism of Comprehensive Dialogue Partnerships, leading to the formation of several ASEAN Plus One groupings. So far, ASEAN has laid the strategic structure of balancing big powers by and large, with itself as the 'core'. ASEAN has built ASEAN Plus One cooperative mechanisms with China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand, the European Union, Russia, and the United States. Also, ASEAN has negotiated or is negotiating with these powers the establishment of FTAs. Moreover, ASEAN has persuaded all Asia-Pacific powers except the United States to sign the TAC. So, we can conclude that ASEAN has created a relationship structure in the Asia-Pacific region that resembles a Chinese folding-fan, with ASEAN as the joint point of the ribs of the fan, while those ASEAN Plus One mechanisms are the supportive ribs. That is the basic structure under which ASEAN can carry out its strategy of balancing big powers.

The functional logic of ASEAN's strategy of balancing big powers is as follows. While ASEAN is building the strategic folding-fan, it is also providing channels for regional powers to realise their interests in the Southeast Asia region. In the past, big powers scrambled for spheres of influence in the region and tended to contest with hard or realist means. Now, ASEAN members hope to maintain equal, peaceful and co-existent relations with big powers in the region. As a result, through a series of new regional mechanisms, ASEAN leaders are trying to admit big powers into the Southeast Asian region in a peaceful, friendly and 'win-win' way, endowing the idealistic folding-fan with realistic effects. The main mechanistic measures are that: (1) ASEAN develops partnerships with big powers so as to strengthen political mutual trust and friendship; (2) big powers sign the TAC at ASEAN's urging, thereby making them legally committed to not using armed force in the region; and (3) ASEAN builds FTAs with big powers respectively, leading to profound interdependent relationships. Due to the fact that ASEAN is the initiator and participator of all those various mechanisms, it will be more informed than other powers and it will develop the

mechanisms with different powers as need and opportunity arise. So, ASEAN can fully make use of the two advantages to carry out strategies for its own benefit. For example, it is carrying out FTA negotiations with China, India, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand respectively. Because there is no coordination among these powers and they are negotiating different timetables with ASEAN, ASEAN can take advantage of all relevant information in the negotiations and make optimal evaluations, either to raise its negotiating price or to raise its status in international relations.

The normative power

At first, some former leaders of Asian countries (such as Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia's Mahathir) advocated the concept of 'Asian Values'. Then there emerged the 'ASEAN Way', which promoted the development of regional cooperation in East Asia. In any event, all these affect the regional trend of thought. In particular, the 'ASEAN Way' and East Asian Regionalism appear more consistent with the complexity and diversity in East Asia and more acceptable to international society. The 'ASEAN Way' emphasises the principles of negotiation, consensus and comfort, while East Asian Regionalism is open.

In her famous book titled *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy*, Susan Strange argued that, in the era of economic globalisation, power derives from the interaction of the following four structures: security, production, finance and knowledge. Strange's theory of structural interaction reinforces the argument advanced above on how ASEAN countries may obtain power.³ ASEAN members shape a new regional security structure through regional cooperation and a strategy of balancing powers; they build a new regional production structure based on ASEAN's role as 'wheel and axle'; they create a regional finance structure to protect the financial security of small countries through East Asia cooperation; and they establish a new regional norm structure through perfecting and practising the 'ASEAN Way'. In essence, structure leads to power, though the solidity (consistence) of this kind of power remains an open question.

ASEAN has obtained the following four strategic benefits: (1) the impression of a poor and backward Southeast Asia which was the target of sphere of influence competition among the big powers has been replaced by a new ASEAN that impresses with its equal and peaceful coexistence with the big countries in the region; (2) economic interdependence has been deepened and regional economic cooperation has been guided by building FTAs with the big powers; (3) a commitment by the big powers on the solution of conflicts without resorting to armed force has been introduced, by the signing of the TAC by all major Asia-Pacific countries except the United States (France (from the European Union) joined the TAC in January 2007); and (4) manoeuvring, checking and balancing

among the big countries stimulates them to attach greater importance to Southeast Asian states and, hence, to increase their respective strategic inputs.

All of these benefits for ASEAN are, in turn, conducive to the stability and prosperity of the region and to establishing the new model of international relationships.

ASEAN power and China

For the ASEAN countries, being surrounded by the big powers is an unalterable geographical reality. At the same time, ASEAN can change or shape its strategic environment. ASEAN can co-dance harmoniously with the big powers by relying on the concerted efforts from within together with the international situation, as well as via creating and implementing both the strategy of 'check and balance' among those powers and the strategy of East Asia cooperation. As a result, a regional new order can be established that features peace and prosperity. Along this course, China can offer help and support to ASEAN to fulfil its goals and resolve its problems, so as to achieve a 'win-win' outcome in the region.

Put another way, the success of ASEAN in forging a new security framework to a large extent relies on strategic support from China, which is a firm supporter of ASEAN integration. While some countries seek to dominate the process of East Asian cooperation, China is actively maintaining the leadership status of ASEAN. China was the first big power to negotiate the establishment of FTAs with ASEAN, to join TAC, to establish a strategic partnership with ASEAN, and to bring 'smile diplomacy' to Southeast Asia. It also hopes to become the first to sign the *Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone*. The positive role of China has drawn other counterparts to show their goodwill to ASEAN, which has enabled the proper performance of the balance strategy and the regional cooperation strategy of ASEAN. With the joint efforts of China and ASEAN, other powers have begun to approach Southeast Asia in a similar manner, so as to achieve cooperation, a 'win-win' outcome, and equality, which is objectively conducive to multipolarity in the region. To help others and to achieve this 'win-win' outcome at the same time, the China-ASEAN relationship has become a good example of how to develop and handle international relationships.

Over the past 15 years, having helped ASEAN tide over the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis and the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak, China then attempted to control the H5N1 influenza through joint efforts with ASEAN. Over the next 15 years, the risks confronting ASEAN from modernisation and globalisation will not diminish. For China, the next 15 years will also be a period in which strategic opportunities and protruding contradictions abound. The deepening strategic partnership between China and ASEAN calls for sharing the risks as well as the gains. In the future, the joint mission for the two sides

will be how to avoid strategic risks and take economic and social risks under control. In essence, as China helps extricate ASEAN from risks and worries, a 'win-win' outcome for the region can also be achieved.

Judged from the development of bilateral relations between ASEAN and China since the end of the Cold War, China and ASEAN have achieved a 'win-win' relationship. China's relations with ASEAN and with ASEAN's members respectively have all reached the most positive point in history. The two sides witnessed positive developments simultaneously in many aspects: the coincidence of China's rise and ASEAN's ascendant status in the international community; and the coincidence of China's greater influence and ASEAN's more dominant role in the region. In a word, ASEAN and China go forward in tandem. The phrase 'Strategic Partnership Relationship' indicates that China's relations with ASEAN as a whole have risen to an unprecedented height, which will not be surpassed by China's relations with other regions.

The progress of China-ASEAN relations brings the feelings of stability, sureness and accomplishment to China's neighbour policy. This is the first time that such feelings have characterised China's relations with Southeast Asia. The benefits from this good relationship are wide-ranging: China can deal with the North Korean problem, China-Japan relations and the Taiwan issue attentively; it can, together with ASEAN, promote the development of East Asia regional cooperation, or even pan-Asian cooperation including Central Asia and South Asia; and it can associate itself with ASEAN's strategy of balancing powers in a natural way, and thus reduce the worrisome attitudes of other powers (such as the United States and Japan) toward China. Meanwhile, ASEAN has gained weight and influence from its good relationship with China. For example, China supports the process of integration within ASEAN and its dominant role in the development of East Asian cooperation on the basis that this does not harm the interests of other regions. This kind of relationship is a comparatively stable situation, resulting from complex interactions in a global context. As a result, there is great rationality and vitality within this relationship.

In view of the above, China's future strategy should include the following points. First, China should continue to support ASEAN's process of integration, and seek to link it with the three communities within ASEAN, which are still in the construction phase. Second, China should advocate ASEAN's dominant role in the development of the East Asia Cooperation, and realise China's own strategic interests while helping ASEAN to achieve the ideal regional structure. Third, China should be fully aware that it is only one part of ASEAN's strategy of balancing major powers. In future, big powers, such as the United States, Japan, India and Australia will definitely increase their strategic presence in this region. In this circumstance, China should not treat other regional powers

as enemies or exclude other big power interests from the region. Rather, China should share its interests with the other big powers in the region.

ENDNOTES

¹ Pang Zhongying article available at <<http://news.sina.com.cn/w/2005-12-12/10248559207.shtml>>, accessed 5 May 2008.

² This chapter was written before mid-2009. On 22 July 2009, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton signed the United States' 'Instrument of Accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia'. The 10 ASEAN Foreign Ministers then signed an 'Instrument of Extension of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia', completing US accession to TAC.

³ See Susan Strange, *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000.