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Dear readers:

Welcome to the November 2016 issue of Thinking ASEAN!

We start this issue with an overview of Myanmar’s 21st-Century Panglong Conference. Amara Thiha, Program Manager at the Technical Secretariat Center of the Joint Ceasefire Committee, sketches out the history, challenges, and prospects of this conference as Myanmar embarks on a journey toward national reconciliation.

The second article of this month focuses on the evolution of defense diplomacy in Southeast Asia. Jun Yan Chang, who is an Associate Research Fellow in Military Studies at Singapore’s S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies and PhD candidate at the University of Queensland, Australia, analyzes and critiques the development of defense diplomacy in Southeast Asia.

Our last articles comes from Moch Faisal Karim, international relations lecturer at Bina Nusantara University in Jakarta, Indonesia, and PhD candidate at the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom. His article stresses the importance for ASEAN to remain central in the construction of the international order in East Asia, and proposes how the East Asia Summit might provide a way for this.

This month's infographic presents findings of a recent Habibie Center working paper on the effectiveness of ASEAN engagement with non-state actors. Meanwhile, our ASEAN Round Up features articles on Thailand after the passing of King Bhumibol, evidence of intentional fire in Rohingya villages in Myanmar, and the daily reality of living on Indonesian peatlands.

Please do not hesitate to drop us a line at thinkingasean@habibiecenter.or.id if you have suggestions or prospective submissions.

Happy reading!
Best regards from Jakarta,

Ray Hervandi
Managing Editor
The 21st-Century Panglong Conference: A Journey Toward National Reconciliation

Amara Thiha is Program Manager at the Technical Secretariat Center of the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee (JMC) in Myanmar. The JMC was formed in November 2015, a month after the country’s nationwide ceasefire pact (NCA) went into effect.

After the end of the Second World War, a historic summit to negotiate the founding principles of the nascent Union of Burma took place in February 1947 at Panglong in Shan State. The resulting, British-supervised Panglong Agreement promised autonomy to the parts of Burma where the country’s ethnic minorities live. On February 12, 1947, in anticipation of the country’s independence, the interim government of Major General Aung San—a leader of the Bamar majority and founder of the country’s armed forces, the Tatmadaw—and leaders of the Chin, Kachin, and Shan minorities signed the agreement.

Tragically, on July 19, 1947, five months after the Panglong Agreement was signed, Aung San was assassinated. The agreement languished under Burma’s successive governments as the Tatmadaw moved into the uplands and tried to bring those areas under control, resulting in a series of armed confrontations with most of the country’s ethnic minorities.

After decades of political freeze and violent insurgency, Myanmar—the country changed its name in 1989—moved forward as its government and eight of more than 20 non-state armed groups signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) on October 15, 2015. The NCA laid down the foundation for Myanmar’s peace process. Following up on the NCA, then-President Thein Sein convened the first Union Peace Conference (UPC) on January 12, 2016, with the NCA signatories.

Convening a second Panglong Conference to start national reconciliation has been a main goal for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who is Aung San’s daughter, and the National League for Democracy (NLD) since 2011, when she was released from house arrest. As soon as the NLD took over in April 2016, the Myanmar government declared the peace process a priority in its first 100-day agenda.

On April 27, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi met with the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee (JMC) for the first time. She announced her desire to convene the 21st-Century Panglong Conference, as the subsequent rounds of the UPC are known, within the first 100 days of the NLD government. Participation in the conference goes beyond the NCA signatories to ensure the equal and broader inclusion of the ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), ethnic representatives and political parties.
The First Meeting of the 21st-Century Panglong Conference

The 21st-Century Panglong Conference takes the form of a series of sessions among stakeholders on a wide range of issues. While its structure for convening and decision-making, known as the Framework for Political Dialogue (FPD), are still under review, the conference plays a similar role to the UPC where the Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee (UPDJC) will decide, sign, and ratify the framework for the political dialogue.

Since not all stakeholders have presented their political positions in the past, the first meeting of the conference was aimed at political inclusion that includes reviewing the FPD and negotiations with non-signatories of the NCA. Over 800 stakeholders from the government, parliamentarians, the Tatmadaw, signatories of the NCA, the United Nationalities Federal Alliance (UNFC), and political parties have participated in the 21st-Century Panglong Conference.

Over 1,500 stakeholders and international agencies, including United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, attended the opening ceremony of the 21st-Century Panglong Conference on August 31, 2016, in Naypyidaw. The United Wa State Army (UVSA—Wa) and the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA—Mong La) participated as observers, but the Wa contingent left on the second day due to a misunderstanding with the organizing committee.

Both State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the commander-in-chief of the Tatmadaw, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, addressed the importance of the NCA to the peace process at the opening session, and reaffirmed that peace process will continue based on the NCA. Due to time limitation, participants had only 10 minutes each to expand on their policy statements on subjects ranging from federalism and security to education and taxation.

Thematic Areas: Challenges and Public Discourse

One of the drawbacks of the first meeting of the 21st-Century Panglong Conference was the lack of a structured agenda for negotiations and discussions. As the event was designed to create a platform with political inclusion as a priority, the first meeting had no framework for theme-based discussions, unlike the previous UPC. Pre-conference negotiations focused on the inclusion of stakeholders rather than on the conference agenda. As a result, during the conference, participants delivered their perspectives on different issues and failed to prepare for negotiations over a final agreement.

However, the conference served as a breakthrough in public discourse in Myanmar as it was broadcast live for the first time. Throughout the conference, the Myanmar public was able to access the presentation of policy papers of the diverse stakeholders who spoke mostly about the security sector and the issue of federalism in Myanmar. Over 70 papers were presented within the four days on the conference. The security sector was the most discussed topic, appearing in 61 papers. As a side effect of the open access, demand for autonomous regions nevertheless strengthened.

Security-Sector Development

A great majority of the policy papers that the conference featured mention security-sector issues. Most center on four different topics:

1. The formation of a standard/professional army,
2. The formation of a federal army,
3. Other security forces, and
4. Reform of the security sector.

Formation of a standard/professional army has been on the agenda since the first UPC that took place in January. The Tatmadaw used the term “standard army” to describe a modernized, efficient military force. The EAOs, on the other hand, use the term “professional army” to refer to civilian control over the military and non-interference of the Tatmadaw in Myanmar politics.

Likewise, the creation of a federal army has been a topic of discussion among the EAOs, particularly the UNFC, since the start of the NCA negotiations. Some EAOs prefer ethnic group control and command over different parts of a possible federal military. In opposition, the Tatmadaw believes that the Union of Myanmar should only have one armed forces and it is that military. The government also supports this last stance.

To reform the security sector, the Tatmadaw insists on prioritizing disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) and would like to wrap up political dialogues within three to five years. The EAOs, however, wants a wider security-sector reform to reflect their vision of an Integrated Security Sector Reform. For them, DDR will unfold when political agreements are achieved and the dialogue process completes.

Unlike the first UPC, there was no change in the Tatmadaw positions while the EAOs presented a more comprehensive policy position. Nevertheless, the gap on the conceptual level is still large and both sides have not reached a common position for political negotiations. Without this, any agreement resulting from the 21st-Century Panglong Conference will be difficult to reach.

Federalism and Autonomous Regions

One of the most publicly discussed topics during the 21st-Century Panglong Conference concerned the issue of federalism in Myanmar and the rights of the autonomous regions. While representatives from the major ethnic minorities discussed a federal state based on the eight ethnic groups, other, smaller ethnic minorities still demand their own autonomous regions. This creates not only tension between the Bamar majority and ethnic minorities, but also between the major and the smaller ethnic minorities.

Some ethnic minorities, such as the Wa and the Pa-O minorities, have historically agitated for their own states long before the 21st-Century Panglong Conference. The movement for a Pa-O state has gained momentum since 2010, while the UVSA has demanded for a separate state in different political negotiations with the Union. At the conference, the Shan Ni and other ethnic groups in Kachin State have asked for their own autonomous regions. Unsurprisingly, this heightens tension as Kachin political parties and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) have always insisted they represent all minor ethnic groups within Kachin State.

In response to discussions of a federal state with regard to the non-Bamar ethnic groups, the Tatmadaw commander-in-chief took the
stance that addressing it is inappropriate. This is because, he argued, different ethnic groups are spread along different states. As the ethnic minority and the federation issues have been around for the last 60 years, proposals and presentations on the two topics at the 21st-Century Panglong Conference will require further development and debate before the two topics can be put to rest.

After the 21st-Century Panglong Conference: Challenges and Followup

The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement

Signing the NCA remains a necessary step to participating in the upcoming political dialogues. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether members of the UNFC will sign the NCA without their allies’ signatures. The Myanmar government has refused to allow the Arakan Army (AA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) to sign the NCA. However, without the UNFC signature, it will be difficult to reach an all-inclusive NCA.

In addition, the UWSA and the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) take the position that they can engage in direct political negotiations since there has been no clash with the Tatmadaw in the last two decades. Furthermore, inclusion of the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland/Nagalam (NSCN-K) in future political negotiations is questionable since the issue is cross-border. As State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, like the Tatmadaw commander in chief, continues to insist on the signature of the NCA before parties can take part in the forthcoming dialogue in February, it is unlikely that the session will represent all EAOs.

Framework for Political Dialogue

Although the FPD has been approved and adopted before the first UPC in January, it was drafted after negotiations with the original signatories of the NCA. As the objective of the 21st-Century Panglong Conference is to create a politically inclusive roadmap toward national reconciliation, review of the political framework is imperative for the inclusion of non-signatories of NCA in the peace dialogue.

As the NCA is the document of reference on drafting the FPD, inclusion of the non-signatories is an important point for negotiations. The government, signatories, and non-signatories—known as Delegates for Political Negotiations—are still negotiating the framework and what it would take to become an NCA signatory.

Although all parties have reached the preliminary agreement on the inclusion of non-signatories in the review process, the UPDJC will still have to approve the reviewed framework before submitting it to the Joint Implementation and Coordination Meeting (JICM) for ratification. In addition, participation at upcoming national dialogues and the 21st-Century Panglong Conference pivots around signing the NCA: non-signature means no space to participate in the peace process.

More recently, the UPDJC met to approve the framework on October 28 in Naypyidaw. The committee also agreed on topics and thematic areas to be discussed at the upcoming session of the 21st-Century Panglong Conference in February 2017. The National Dialogue will unfold in several states as a pilot project before February.

Clashes After the First Session of the 21st-Century Panglong Conference

Clashes and mobilization within Kachin State increased after the 21st-Century Panglong Conference, in comparison with previous years. Clashes in northern Shan State remained steady between the TNLA, the Tatmadaw, and the Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army (RCSS/SSA).

Separately, the UWSA took control the strategic outpost of the NDAA early this month. Although no casualty was reported, this was a bold move as they had been considered as permanent allies since the fall of the Communist Party in eastern Shan State. The primary cause of this event is still not clear; but it may be due to the NDAA policy towards the central government during the 21st-Century Panglong Conference.

At the first session of the conference, the NDAA participated at the highest levels while the UWSA sent only its liaison team. The NDAA also supports the autonomy of some ethnic groups in Shan State, where the UWSA (Southern) had settled since the mid-1990s. Tension remains in NDAA-controlled areas, and reports mention increased Tatmadaw troops in eastern Shan State in recent days. Both armed groups have agreed to calm down the tension to avoid open armed clashes.

The Legacy of the 21st-Century Panglong Conference

The success of the first session of the 21st-Century Panglong Conference pivots around having non-signatories of the ceasefire pact as part of the conference, making it the most-inclusive peace conference in Myanmar history. However, it is too early to conclude if it would set any significant policy changes or agreement, apart from the niceties of the ceremonial opening of the process. A truly successful 21st-Century Panglong Conference will require better structural dialogues and coordination, even if public expectations of it are high that it will lay down a political culture of negotiations over political issues.
Defense Diplomacy in ASEAN?

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Defense diplomacy is clearly on the rise in Asia, and likewise in Southeast Asia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In one of the earliest studies on defense diplomacy in the region, Bhubhindar Singh and See Seng Tan write that the "impressive number of ASEAN defense-related meetings, conferences and activities taking place on a multilateral basis reflects a surprising high degree of institutionalization" before going on to list these.¹ Today, one would conceivably be hard-pressed to list all the bilateral and multilateral activities between ASEAN member states that fall under the ambit of defense diplomacy. There are however, several shortcomings with the state of the study of defense diplomacy, in general, as well as in Southeast Asia.

Triangulating Defense Diplomacy

Broadly speaking, defense diplomacy can be defined as the "peacetime cooperative use of armed forces and related infrastructure (primarily defense ministries) as a tool of foreign and security policy."² This ostensibly boosts defense and military ties and reduces the likelihood of conflict and war.

At first glance hence, the phrase "defense diplomacy" seems to be an oxymoron since it combines cooperation with the traditional conceptualization of militaries in its coercive use of force and its associated functions of defense, deterrence, compellence, and swaggering. The phrase is perhaps less confusing than the phrase "gunboat diplomacy," although instrumentally, the latter is less conflicted than the former. Nevertheless, defense diplomacy has been increasingly accepted in the lexicon of security studies and it "encompasses a wide range of activities that might in the past have been described as military cooperation or military assistance," such as the appointment of defense attachés to other countries or military exercises with other armed forces.³

Furthermore, the idea of defense diplomacy can be identified to have arisen in the aftermath of the Cold War. The winning side led by the United States tried to socialize states of the former Warsaw Pact, with some of them eventually joining the North
Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). This use of “military cooperation and assistance to promote democratic civilian control of armed forces as part of wider efforts to support liberal democracy and good governance” can therefore be linked to the democratic peace thesis.4

In Southeast Asia, defense diplomacy is widely seen to be divided into three groups. The first is the official Track 1 events, such as those conducted by the armed forces or meetings and exercises under the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM) agenda. One example is the May 2016 Maritime Security and Counter-Terrorism Exercise, the largest ADMM-Plus exercise to date, which included Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russia, and the United States in addition to the ten ASEAN member states. The exercise involved eighteen naval vessels, twenty-five aircraft and more than three thousand troops.

The second group includes unofficial Track 2 activities like those organized by the Network of ASEAN Defence and Security Institutions (NADI), which comprises think tanks and research institutions in support of the ADMM. The third group is a curious mix of the first two clusters, a Track 1.5, which involves both officials and non-officials in exchanges of views, for example, the Shangri-La Dialogue organized annually by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in Singapore. This latter designation is somewhat of a misnomer since there are “undeniably complex and symbiotic relationships between the national and transnational, the unofficial and official, and Track 1 and Track 2 processes” that “must be taken into account” when analyzing Track 2 events in Southeast Asia.5 Thus, given the close relationships some regional think tanks have with their national governments, the need to have a separate, semi-official Track 1.5 category is questionable.

Moreover, defense diplomacy is not used to promote democracy in Southeast Asia, in which there are various non-democratic states, especially since the norm of non-intervention is an entrenched part of the regime of the ASEAN Way. The status of civil-military relations within states across Southeast Asia is also a remarkably complex one. The situation ranges from the old dwifungsi role of the military in Indonesia combining politics and security, to the military dictatorship currently in the throes of a transition to a civilian government in Myanmar, to the civil-military fusion in Singapore, to the current military junta in Thailand which was the result of the latest of numerous military coups throughout Thailand’s history. These, as a result, make any presumed democratizing objective with defense diplomacy inherently challenging. Defense diplomacy in Southeast Asia is thus different from that of the West.

**Circling Diplomacy**

Two further criticisms can be made of defense diplomacy in Southeast Asia, both linked to a narrow focus and overemphasis of the “diplomacy” within the phrase, treating it as a noun suffix with “defence” therefore merely a modifier prefix. This overly privileges the function and purpose of “diplomacy” in its classical definition of “the management of international relations by negotiation,” whilst transforming the role of its agent, the military, into a reductionist one.

The first is a problem frequently associated with ASEAN and ASEAN-led initiatives: the perennial puzzle of whether or not ASEAN is more than a “talkshop.” In this case, the question is whether defense diplomacy in the region can actually lead to concrete results, be it preventive diplomacy to head off conflicts, dispute settling mechanisms to thwart the escalation of conflicts, or even the establishment of a Deustchian security community wherein war and the use of force becomes unthinkable in light of “dependable expectations of peaceful change.”

In this regard, ASEAN itself has often come across as lacking, even for archetypal cases of cooperation such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). Despite all the defense diplomacy related activities under the aegis of ASEAN, including ADMM-Plus HADR exercises, when push comes to shove, ASEAN has demonstrated a distinct lack of coordinated and collective action, in part due to its accepted norms of non-interference and consensus-building hindering such action. During Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, there was little of note in ASEAN’s response other than a team of only thirteen “to monitor and disseminate information on the ground and the deployment of one staff member to Tacloban,” whilst throughout the search for MH370 in 2014, there simply was no “concerted response from ASEAN.”6

The other criticism is more generic to the study of defense diplomacy: it is overwhelmingly seen as cooperative, as an emphasis on diplomacy would demand in spirit. Its nature is thus frequently understood as postmodernist in comparison to the modernist and competitive Westphalian nation-state. Studies of defense diplomacy are therefore often skewed towards the positive end of the equation, such as how defense diplomacy activities are confidence-building measures or how good military-to-military ties help smooth over any political hiccups. Media statements and reports are likewise upbeat, commonly with keywords such as “fostering trust,” “building interoperability,” or “information sharing.”

Nonetheless, there is another darker side of the defense diplomacy coin: there is modernist competition involved as well simply because the ultimate goal herein is defense, a national interest, and such competition is often overlooked and underexplored. As Andrew Cotter and Anthony Forster noted, traditionally, “military cooperation and assistance have largely been part of international realpolitik, balance-of-power politics and the pursuit of narrowly defined national interests.”7 Whilst the ending of the Cold War helped boost the cooperative part of defense diplomacy, analysts have tended to ignore the competitive element within defense diplomacy.

Activities under the umbrella of defense diplomacy can all be construed with a competitive viewpoint in the game of international relations within an anarchic international system, with the stakes as simple as survival or as high as dominance. Meetings and discussions between military
personnel and civilians from the defense establishments are about gaining a putative edge over a potential enemy. Defense treaties warn off rivals. Placing personnel in foreign countries gives them insights into prospective opponents, be it in terms of force structure or strategic culture.

Military exercises are conducted to understand how potential adversaries operate, collecting sensitive information and serving also to demonstrate own capabilities for a deterrent effect. Even HADR missions underline the message that the receiving state is unable to respond to its own citizens’ distress without help, presumably from another superior state, not to mention that they serve as the perfect rehearsal for amphibious operations.

**Squaring the D: Putting Defense Back into Diplomacy**

I am not suggesting here that the state of defense diplomacy activities is completely bleak, nor that such activities are purely a front for more insidious intents. What I am pointing out is merely that the competitive and cooperative aspects of defense diplomacy exist concurrently and side by side, like the proverbial double-edged sword. When states offer humanitarian aid, is there altruism involved? Of course there is. Moreover, alongside cooperative needs concluding with the growing recognition that individual states cannot solve transnational challenges alone, there are also competitive opportunities starting from the state’s self-interest.

These are not completely novel insights. Any practitioner or military scholar would know these. Yet, competitive defense diplomacy has been understated, at least out in the open. Part of the reason for this could possibly be boiled down to standard military secrecy, with another conceivable part to standard military secrecy, with another conceivable part to diplomatic sensitivities, which are arguably more true and heightened in the Asia-Pacific and Southeast Asia, vestigial remnants of a modernist world which is rapidly moving towards the postmodern as the world grows more globalized and interconnected, although events such as Brexit or the spread of the far right in Europe, or the rise of Donald Trump in the United States, seemed to suggest the steming of the tide of making the world flatter.

Recent scholarship has started to accentuate the defense in defense diplomacy. For example, Jeffrey Engstrom has pointed out that increasing East Asian military involvement in HADR is likely a side effect of “enhancements made to develop more combat-centric force projection capabilities.” David Capie contended that “HADR also advances core goals related to traditional defense missions,” and with Alan Chong and Jun Yan Chang increasingly highlighting the security competition between states taking place in HADR and other instances of disasters in order to demonstrate their superior defense capabilities. Such competition is hence “by proxy” as opposed to more overt traditional mechanisms, such as arms races.

More studies, however, would need to be done to figure out exactly how much “defense” features in defense diplomacy and the impact of this upon “diplomacy” to analyze if defense diplomacy is genuinely a paradox. This would subsequently have obvious policy implications, beginning with the true cost or value of defense diplomacy.

**Endnotes**


3. Ibid., pp. 6-7.


In the post-Cold War era, East Asia has undergone fundamental changes. These are even more visible in the 21st century with the rise of China and the United States’ long-term plan for pivoting to the region, as well as the emergence of Asian middle powers and ASEAN’s greater role as a global actor. These changes have shifted the world’s strategic and economic heft to the region’s advantage.

While Cold War-era East Asia was characterized by the lack of institution-building efforts, currently regionalism is burgeoning at both the multilateral or bilateral levels, ranging from security to economic cooperation. Despite the proliferation of regional cooperation, however, many observers still see cooperation in Asia as lacking in substance.

Thus, the region is now in a critical juncture when it comes to regional architecture building. How will East Asia’s regional architecture look like in the future? Will recent developments lead to a more Asia-oriented community? How should the Asia-Pacific respond to the strategic challenges in East Asia, such as the territorial disputes in both Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia as well as historical enmity among countries in the region?

This article attempts to sketch out how multilateral cooperation within East Asia remains the fundamental building block for regional architecture building. Given that ASEAN’s regional community building is ongoing and currently represents the most institutionalized multilateral cooperation in the region, this article further asserts that the centrality of ASEAN drives forward the international architecture in East Asia through insisting on a multilateral approach in the construction of a new regional order.

To do so, ASEAN needs to heavily invest in the institution-building exemplified by, for example, the East Asia Summits. The domestic constraints will be the most salient challenge for ASEAN as it struggles to maintain cohesion in exercising its central role in the international order in East Asia.
The Evolution of East Asia’s Regional Architecture

Since the end of the World War II, East Asia’s regional architecture has been mainly driven by the United States as it attempts to maintain presence in the region as well as ward off potential challengers hostile to the superpower. During the Cold War, Washington created a US-centric security order in East Asia through alliances and cooperation with several countries in the region.

This hub-and-spoke strategy centers on alliances, formal or otherwise, with Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines. The strategy has served as the most robust foundation for East Asia’s regional security architecture. Meanwhile, ASEAN’s regional architecture building was primarily focused on maintaining peace and order in Cold War-era Southeast Asia, and as such was inward-looking.

However, the return of China to global prominence and a more institutionalized and outward-looking ASEAN have resulted in changes in East Asian security dynamics. The reality of China’s continued rise is now a fact that states in the region must deal with as it is heavily tied to the region’s economic growth. Thus, to keep the United States bound to the region at China’s expense is no longer in the interest of states in East Asia.

To fill the gap of a regional architecture, ASEAN established the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994 with the aim of maintaining US military engagement with the region and simultaneously building cooperation with China in the post-Cold War era.

Despite well-founded criticism of the ARF as little more than a “talkshop,” the platform is effective at confidence-building measure by reducing tension and suspicion. However, ARF has from its inception featured very weak structures, modalities, and processes. As a multilateral forum, the ARF has no mechanism to force participating countries to use it to solve problems.

The South China Sea disputes are a good case in point. The ARF has failed to present itself as a platform for China and the Southeast Asia disputants to solve their overlapping claims despite the fact that it has conflict prevention instruments. Moreover, East Asia is home to crisscrossing multilateral security initiatives, both formal and informal, such as the Shangri-La Dialogue and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM).

As Nick Bisley has argued, the United States seems eager to engage ASEAN-led multilateral initiatives in managing its relations with the growing China in the region. However, the United States has paid more attention to more technical multilateral initiatives rather than leader-led summity that lead to less concrete plans on cooperation. Furthermore, China seems to undermine the ARF when the conversation turns to the growing tension in the South China Sea, of which eventual resolution requires multilateral, not bilateral, negotiations. As a result, the ARF has little to show as a platform for multilateralism that engages major powers in East Asia.

China’s spectacular economic rise prompted ASEAN to engage Northeast Asia with the establishment of the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) forum that brings together China, Japan, and South Korea for regular summits. This limited scope, however, has also meant restricted freedom as a platform to develop regional architecture.

The APT ignores the roles of other major powers in East Asia that are important to regional architecture building, so the platform is prone to the limits and interests of dominant powers. China, in effect, can and has limited discussion to topics it allows.

All this means that East Asia lacks a coherent and credible multilateral regional architecture that represents a more balanced distribution of power in the region and at the same time puts ASEAN central to regional architecture building efforts.

Reinventing the East Asian Summit?

To realign ASEAN-centered multilateral initiatives in both the security and economic realms, ASEAN should further boost the East Asia Summit (EAS) as a forum for inclusive regional architecture in East Asia. Currently, the EAS is a leaders-led summit with ASEAN as the driving force in partnership with other participating states. From the beginning, the EAS is aimed to be an open, inclusive, transparent and outward-looking with a format that features strategic discussions on various themes pertinent to the region.

The EAS idea can be traced from the idea voiced by Malaysia’s Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad in the early 1990s when he proposed the establishment of an East Asian Economic Grouping, later renamed as the East Asian Economic Caucus. Currently, the membership of the EAS comprises the ten ASEAN countries (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Burma, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam), Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, the United States, and Russia.

Together, they comprise 55 percent of the world’s population and represent 55 percent of global GDP. ASEAN should take advantage as much as possible with the entry of the United States and the Russian Federation. They represent an important component in strengthening regional architecture while maintaining the principle of ASEAN centrality in the region.

Currently, the EAS has already developed six main areas of cooperation: environment and energy; education; finance; global health issues and pandemic diseases; natural disaster management; and ASEAN connectivity. Through these areas, ASEAN has enhanced the idea of East Asia Summit as a platform to better relations with major powers in the region. In addition, ASEAN should also address major regional security issues.
China’s growing assertiveness and dominating role in bilateral relations with individual ASEAN members and other EAS members, as well as the US pivot policy should elicit an ASEAN response aimed at balancing the two. Through EAS, ASEAN should further enhance its new role as a manager of the growing rivalry between the United States and China.

While the United States has succeeded in establishing and maintaining its hub-and-spoke system through bilateral agreements with East Asian countries, it could not address the increasingly complex regional dynamics in the region. ASEAN-led EAS can be a major platform to restrain a strong US dominating role by providing ASEAN a greater role in managing US relations with China by setting up the agenda. Furthermore, China has limited power in influencing through multilateral approach and so its dominating influence can be moderated through robust ASEAN-led multilateral initiatives.

Challenges Ahead

One of the challenges to further enhance the EAS as a multilateral platform for the regional architecture in East Asia is the cohesiveness of ASEAN as an actor. ASEAN members, especially the smaller ones, are prone to major powers’ influence on their strategic actions within ASEAN. Given ASEAN consensus-minded approach in decision-making, this may restrain ASEAN from being more proactive in building an inclusive regional architecture.

A recent move by several countries that openly bandwagoned with China and the US intention to enhance bilateral military cooperations with Vietnam amidst tension between Vietnam and China in South China should be evaluated with caution. The leaders of ASEAN should have the same understanding on the importance of the ASEAN unity to make it a credible manager of regional dynamics in East Asia. Moreover, ASEAN should make more concrete initiatives produced through the EAS.

Keeping ASEAN centrality in the regional architecture building should be a priority of an ASEAN that wishes to stay relevant as an important role in the era of uncertainty. ASEAN must address moves by several member countries that might undermine its regional centrality, given that it is only credible when it is impartial.

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HOW EFFECTIVE IS ASEAN ENGAGEMENT WITH NON-STATE ACTORS?

ASEAN—and its related mechanisms—have established many platforms for engagement with Non-State Actors (NSA). However, their effectiveness remains a concern with analysts and activists alike voicing concern over the meaningfulness of those engagements. This infographic summarizes the findings of a working paper titled, “Non-State Actors’ Engagement With ASEAN: Current State Of Play & Way Forward”, by The Habibie Center’s Alexander Chandra, Rahimah Abdulrahim, and Ibrahim Almuttaqi. The paper aims to be an initial effort to assess the effectiveness of ASEAN-NSAs engagement, as well as existing mechanisms that facilitate interactions between the two parties.

How important do you think ASEAN should be a ‘people-oriented’ or ‘people-centered’ organisation?

How reflective do you think ASEAN policies are towards the aspirations of your constituencies?
Is your organisation involved in any of the existing people-ASEAN engagement mechanisms, including both ASEAN- and non-state actors-led initiatives?

- Yes: 59%
- No: 41%

If your organisation is involved in any of the ASEAN-led engagement mechanisms (e.g. direct interface with ASEAN Leaders, regular participation with and/or in Ministerial and/or Senior Officials Meetings, regular meetings with the ASEAN Secretariat, etc.):

- Extremely Reflective: 14%
- Very Reflective: 14%
- Reflective: 29%
- Somewhat Reflective: 16%
- Not Reflective At All: 27%

If your organisation is involved in any of non-state actors-led engagement mechanisms (e.g. ASEAN Business and Investment Summit for private sector, the ASEAN Civil Society Conference and/or ASEAN People’s Forum for civil society organisations, etc.):

- Extremely Reflective: 11.4%
- Very Reflective: 7%
- Reflective: 24.3%
- Somewhat Reflective: 37.1%
- Not Reflective At All: 20%

Are you familiar with any ASEAN policies that have been generated as a result of your advocacy?

- Yes: 36%
- No: 64%

Respondents Profile:

- Respondents are from Indonesia and Philippines: 60%
- No responses were received from Brunei Darussalam: 0%

- Research institute/think tank/university: 33%
- NGO: 32%
- Private Sector: 16%
- Others: 19%
- Original ASEAN 6 Countries: 81%
- CLMV Countries: 12%
- Outside The ASEAN Region: 7%
The King’s Death Points to Thailand’s Paradox

NPR, October 13, 2016

Here’s one image of Thailand: A magnet for Western tourists. One of Asia’s more dynamic economies. The land of smiles. And until Thursday, home of a beloved monarch who united Thais throughout his 70-year reign.

And here’s another view: A coup-plagued nation where the military ousted an elected government two years ago and suppresses dissent. A country accused of human rights abuses. A land with an authoritarian undercurrent where anyone can be jailed for a negative comment about the royal family.

Read More: http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/10/13/497693229/the-kings-death-points-to-thailands-paradox

Burma: Satellite Images Show Fire-Damaged Villages: UN-Assisted Inquiry Urgently Needed in Rakhine State

Human Rights Watch, October 31, 2016

New satellite imagery shows evident fire-related destruction in at least three villages in Burma’s northern Rakhine State, Human Rights Watch said today. The Burmese government should urgently allow the United Nations to assist in investigating reported destruction of villages in the area. A government-chaperoned delegation of UN aid agencies and foreign diplomats is expected to visit the area on October 31, 2016, marking the first-time international aid agencies have been allowed into the area since October 9, although it is unclear whether they will have full access to affected villages.


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Living in a toxic haze: The daily reality of Indonesia’s peatland fires

*Center for International Forestry Research Blog, November 1, 2016*

Peatland fires in Indonesia push scale-topping figures. Kalimantan alone produced greater levels of carbon emissions than the entire European Union over the most intense burning months of September and October last year. Besides the cost of emissions and hectares burned, research is ongoing into the political economy of the fire and haze, as well as the health impacts and the economic burden the fires present.

The word ‘haze’ is misleadingly benign — in reality, peatland fires produce toxic smoke, containing noxious components such as carbon monoxide, cyanide, ammonia and formaldehyde, in concentrations far beyond safe limits. People breathing this toxic smoke on a prolonged and daily basis during the burning months’ face serious hazards to their health, food security and well-being.


Although 2016’s forest fire haze was not as heavily disseminated in the media as last year’s, it still happened. For local residents, air polluted by foul yellow-colored haze is now considered part of the yearly change of the seasons. This is despite the fact that the smoke was estimated to contribute to nearly 100,000 early deaths in the surrounding area. Yet, the progress in stopping ‘haze season’ from ever coming back has been aggravatingly slow.
The Habibie Center was founded by Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie and family in 1999 as an independent, non-governmental, non-profit organisation. The vision of The Habibie Center is to create a structurally democratic society founded on the morality and integrity of cultural and religious values.

The missions of The Habibie Center are first, to establish a structurally and culturally democratic society that recognizes, respects, and promotes human rights by undertaking study and advocacy of issues related to democratization and human rights, and second, to increase the effectiveness of the management of human resources and the spread of technology.

The ASEAN Studies Program was established on February 24, 2010, to become a center of excellence on ASEAN related issues, which can assist in the development of the ASEAN Community by 2015. The Habibie Center through its ASEAN Studies Program, alongside other institutions working towards the same goal, hopes to contribute to the realization of a more people-oriented ASEAN that puts a high value on democracy and human rights.

The objective of the ASEAN Studies Program is not merely only to conduct research and discussion within academic and government circles, but also to strengthen public awareness by forming a strong network of civil society in the region that will be able to help spread the ASEAN message. With the establishment of ASEAN Studies Program, The Habibie Center aims to play its part within our capabilities to the ASEAN regional development.