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Can ASEAN Cope with China?

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Abstract

The rise of China is the most important development in East Asia of recent times. It presents a major challenge for ASEAN as a collective entity, and for the individual countries that compose it. China's rise presents both opportunities as well as challenges - if not threats. Whether ASEAN can develop a collective, much less an effective, response is far from clear. This paper explores and analyzes the forces that are likely to determine the outcome.

Key words

Rise of China, geopolitics, geoeconomics, ASEAN, ASEAN Way

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Southeast Asia and the Challenge of China

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) occupies a prominent place in studies of regional organizations, especially in what is still referred to sometimes as the ‘developing world’. For a long time ASEAN had few parallels or competitors for the title of the most effective institution outside of ‘the West’ generally or Western Europe more particularly. As a consequence, ASEAN has received a good deal of analytical attention and has attracted highly divergent views in the process. For some observers — most famously Amitav Acharya (2000; 2004), perhaps — ASEAN is an example of the potential influence Southeast Asian states acting collectively can exert over their more powerful peers. For other scholars, ASEAN is noteworthy primarily as a mechanism for avoiding rather than resolving problems (Jones and Smith 2007). Both these arguments have their merits. One way of trying to resolve which side of the debate has the most credibility is to see whether they can explain specific challenges. Fortunately for the scholarly community but less so for ASEAN, such a challenge is at hand.

The so-called ‘rise of China’ presents arguably the most formidable policy challenge ASEAN has faced in existence (Beeson 2010). Even the financial crisis of the late 1990s may come to be seen as short-term and relatively minor by comparison. The sheer scale and complexity of its growing impact across a number of policy domains means that China’s re-emergence as the major power in the East Asian region is not only likely to transform Southeast Asia’s relations with China, but also, perhaps, the internal relations of ASEAN itself (Storey 2013). At the very least it will be a major test of the effectiveness of the so-called ‘ASEAN Way’ and its ability to manage international relations within Southeast Asia, as well as the East Asian region more broadly. In what follows I suggest that it is a test that ASEAN will have difficulty passing. The reality is that ASEAN is not only hamstrung by the relative ineffectiveness of its own internal political practices and norms, but it is being divided by the very country to which it seeks to respond. In other words, an effective, coherent, consistent and collective response to the challenge of China is likely to prove beyond ASEAN’s abilities.

To develop this argument I initially review the competing geopolitical and geoeconomic imperatives that are pulling the ASEAN grouping’s members in different directions. In part this is a function of Southeast Asia’s particular geographical and historical circumstances: the simple fact is that because of the ASEAN membership’s individual histories and priorities, agreement on a common position is unlikely and inherently difficult. Developing a common position would be difficult under any circumstances, but it is compounded by the weakness of ASEAN as a potential collective actor. The quintessential illustration of the limitations and restrictive influence of the ASEAN Way — distinctive norms designed to encourage cooperation and minimize conflict — can be seen in the operation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), an organization that ought to be supremely well placed to play a pivotal role in managing the wider Asia-Pacific region’s security affairs, but which remains marginal and ineffective because of the influence of the ASEAN Way.

Geopolitics, Geoeconomics and History

In some ways, at least, the times ought to suit ASEAN. After all, Southeast Asia has been largely peaceful since the end of the Vietnam War; even the conflicts that have occurred have been relatively confined and not threatening to the security of the region as a whole. Indeed, admirers of ASEAN’s diplomatic culture frequently point to the organization’s role in resolving the ‘Cambodian crisis’ as its finest hour and a vindication of the ASEAN Way of consensus, consultation and cooperation (Askandar et al. 2002). Some go further and attribute the ‘long peace of Asia’ to the influence of ASEAN and its normative practices (Kivimäki 2014).¹

¹ For a critique, see Beeson 2015.

Other observers of a more Realist disposition point out that if the key great powers — China and the United States — hadn't also been interested in reaching a resolution to the crisis, all of ASEAN's efforts would have been in vain (Jones and Smith 2001). In other words, ASEAN's much vaunted capacity to provide regional leadership and be 'in the driving seat' was entirely dependent on a fortuitous coincidence of interests.

These sorts of debates and diametrically opposed opinions are, as we shall see, endemic to ASEAN scholarship. What we can say with some confidence, however, is that throughout ASEAN's entire historical experience 'structural' constraints and the actions of regional and extra-regional great powers have loomed large. In fact, ASEAN's original emergence was, in large part, a consequence of the very challenging geopolitical environment that prevailed in the wider East Asian region during the Cold War (Narine 2002). Not only was there a direct confrontation between the capitalist and communist camps in the region, but this also threatened to directly impact on the newly independent and still insecure regimes of Southeast Asia. It is not necessary to be a subscriber to the so-called 'domino theory' of communist expansion in Southeast Asia to recognize that these were highly febrile and uncertain times for small states in particular (Beeson 2013).

The more recent international environment has been rather different and potentially beneficial from ASEAN's point of view, however. During the 1990s in particular, there was what Edward Luttwak described as a noteworthy shift from geopolitics to geoeconomics (Luttwak 1990). In the aftermath of the Cold War that had had such a constraining influence on the ASEAN states, the structural transformation of the international system seemed to open up new possibilities for the conduct of international relations. At the very least, greater emphasis was given to the 'low' politics of economic development, rather than the traditional preoccupation with security (Baldwin 1985). Given ASEAN's limited ability to determine conventional balance of power outcomes, this ought to have been a moment in which what has been described as its 'balance of influence' approach ought to have come into its own (Ciorciara 2009). In reality, a number of the ASEAN states have increasingly fallen back on a more traditional 'hedging' strategy in which the possible strategic threat posed by China's rise is offset by reinforcing security relations with the US (Cheng-Chwee 2008).

It is no coincidence that during the 1990s we saw the emergence of constructivism as an influential way of thinking about and accounting for important outcomes in international relations (Adler 1997). At a time when geopolitical constraints and the logic of superpower confrontation no longer seemed to exert the same kind of force, ideas and norms seemed to be exerting a more powerful influence over the behavior of states — or, more accurately, policymakers (Ba 2009a). Indeed, at the same time that Realist-inspired international relations practice seemed to be less consequential, so, too, did Realist international relations theory (Legro and Moravcsik 1999). As a result, we witnessed a growing effort to explain ASEAN's surprisingly prominent role in the wider Asia-Pacific region's efforts at institutional innovation (He 2006; Eaton and Stubbs 2006). One of the more important and innovative efforts in this regard was provided by the concept of 'institutionalized hedging' in which institutions became a way of 'balancing against' more powerful states. The implication of this strategy, of course, is that 'many of the new institutions in the Asia Pacific are more devices for institutional balancing than for problem solving' (Rüland 2011, 99).

These different ways of thinking about the nature of balancing and hedging are both illuminating. It is striking that both realists and constructivists have important and insightful things to say about the way security is conceived and realized in the East Asian region. It is precisely because of the complex, multi-dimensional nature of what has been described as the 'regional security complex' (Buzan and Waever 2003) that Katzenstein and Sil argue that we need to adopt an analytically eclectic approach to understanding security in Asia (Katzenstein and Sil 2004). As ever, the challenge is deciding how much causal weight to attach to material and

ideational variables. The principal conclusion that emerges from a consideration of ASEAN's historical development is that such factors vary overtime and are not pre-determined or immutable. On the contrary, ASEAN in particular has demonstrated a capacity to take advantage of changing geopolitical conditions at times in ways that seem at odds with the structural constraints that have at times defined the organization.

Institutional Innovation and the ASEAN Way

For the first few decades after the Second World War regional institutions outside of Western Europe were notable primarily for their absence. Even after ASEAN's establishment in 1967 it was the exception rather than the rule as far as regional organizations were concerned. Since the end of the Cold War, however, there has been a growing interest in developing regional institutions to perform various tasks and/or to coordinate the actions of regional states (Gill and Green 2009). For a region that is generally associated with low levels of regionalism, East Asia and/or the Asia-Pacific has become synonymous with regional innovation. Indeed, it is possible to argue that one of the key problems facing the more broadly conceived Asia-Pacific region has been the existence of too many regional initiatives with overlapping mandates and claims to authority — something that has fundamentally undermined the very idea of a more expansive 'Asia-Pacific' region as a coherent entity (Beeson 2006). This would have been a problem in itself; unfortunately, however, the operating style of most of the regional organizations has been drawn from the ASEAN model and this has further undermined the potential effectiveness of these nascent organizations.

The key problem in this regard has arguably been the ASEAN Way itself. While the ASEAN Way may have made a good deal of sense when the grouping was founded, it is debatable whether it any longer does. To be sure, when the challenge was bringing together a highly disparate group of countries with a history of intramural conflict, a set of diplomatic practices with which members felt comfortable and unthreatened was attractive and possibly necessary to ensure agreement. The problem, however, is that while the ASEAN Way's principles of non-interference in internal affairs, the peaceful resolution of conflicts and a prohibition on the use of force may be understandable — even admirable — they have proved an obstacle to effective cooperation. The emphasis on consensus, not losing face and voluntarism has meant that the politics of the lowest common denominator have inevitably tended to prevail and difficult problems have been avoided rather than confronted.

The limitations of ASEAN's capacity to influence the behavior of its own members, much less that of the superpowers has been clear for some time. The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which provided a code of conduct and guide to behavior for member states, was dependent on individual states to take its precepts and norms seriously. While the TAC included a provision that the "ASEAN High Council would resolve intramural disputes", in reality the High Council has never been convened and participants could potentially veto its actions even if it had been. The key point to make here, perhaps, is that for all the potential attractions of multilateral cooperation and institution building, for such processes to be meaningful the institutional mechanisms themselves must be effective and members must share a genuine commitment to their underlying logic (Keohane et al. 2009; Ruggie 1992). Such commitments have generally been noteworthy for their absence in Southeast Asia (Khong and Nesadurai 2007). An important and revealing illustration of this possibility has been ASEAN's inability to deal with the so-called 'haze' problem, which has caused growing health and political problems, but which has also proved impossible to adequately address (Aggarwal and Chow 2010).

It might seem unfair to criticize ASEAN for failing to achieve goals such as climate change mitigation and pollution control, which even the most 'advanced' polities and economies have struggled with, but ASEAN's record in this regard is particularly unimpressive for two reasons. First, there is no doubt about the extent and impact of the haze problem on the health and well

being of many ASEAN citizens. Second, it is happening and being felt primarily within the ASEAN grouping itself, and therefore the imperatives for action ought to be greater. In reality, however, very little has been achieved, in part because of a lack of state capacity within Indonesia where the problem originates, but also because powerful vested interests within Indonesia and beyond have little interest in trying to address a problem they play a large role in creating and from which they currently profit (Varkkey 2012). In the European Union, by contrast, some serious and effective steps have been taken to mitigate both pollution and carbon emissions and this is a reminder of what can be achieved whether the political will and institutional infrastructure is actually in place (Wurzel and Connelly 2010). Significantly, the EU has the ability to compel compliance with its directives and there is an extant diplomatic culture of sovereignty pooling and cooperation (Kelemen and Vogel 2010; Paterson 2009). Such practices are markedly underdeveloped in ASEAN, by contrast. Arguably the most consequential exemplar of the constraining impact of the ASEAN Way can be found in the ASEAN Regional Forum.

The ASEAN Regional Forum

If ever an organization looked as if it was in the right place at the right time, it is the ARF. It has become one of the clichés of international relations scholarship on East Asia to say that it is home to some of the world's most potentially combustible and seemingly irreconcilable 'flashpoints'. Whether it is the divisions on the Korean peninsula, the problematic status of Taiwan or – as we shall see below – the unresolved territorial claims in the South China Sea, the East Asian region has many strategic questions that need addressing. An organization that includes all of the main players in the region's various security challenges ought to be well placed to help address them, one might have thought. In reality, however, the ARF has typically been an ineffectual bystander and exerted very little influence in efforts to resolve the region's manifold security problems. The principal reason for this can be traced to the counterproductive influence of ASEAN-style diplomacy.

The ARF in Context

The origins of the ARF tell us something important about ASEAN itself. Like ASEAN, the ARF was a product of wider structural changes in the international system. In the ARF's case it was not so much the pressure exerted by a seemingly implacable and permanent bipolar order that was decisive, however. Moments of what Andrew Hurrell calls 'hegemonic compression' open up new possibilities as well as creating a new pattern of international relations (Hurrell 2006). One of the things that developed in the aftermath of the Cold War's ending was a new focus on geoeconomics. In the context of a restructured international order a renewed interest in international institutions among policymakers began to emerge that reflected and built on the growing theoretical interest in regimes and institutions of the 1980s (Keohane 1984). What was noteworthy about the more encompassing Asia-Pacific region, and even the more geographically coherent East Asian region, was a relative absence of effective institutions of any sort. This was especially true with regard to groupings designed to manage an increasingly fluid structure of regional and international power (Narine 2004; Beeson 2014). Although the open-ended nature of this moment may have been relatively brief and snuffed out by the unilateralism of George W. Bush (Prestowitz 2003), while it lasted a number of important regional institutions emerged, not the least of which was the ARF.

Significantly, the impetus – albeit ideational rather than structural – for the ARF came from outside the ASEAN grouping (Yuzawa 2012). Both Canada and Australia proposed developing an Asia-Pacific version of the Conference for Cooperation and Security in Europe (CSCE). But in a recurring theme for the region, the ASEAN countries were not keen to adopt proposals that had their origins outside the region. One of the continuing ideas in Southeast Asia is that ASEAN

ought to remain at the center of the region's institution-building efforts. Threats to ASEAN's notional centrality have consequently been met coolly.² To ensure ASEAN cooperation in any putative organizational initiative it is necessary to subscribe to the ASEAN Way of doing things. Consequently, the ARF and other regional projects such as the largely ineffective Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) grouping have had to operate on the basis of cooperation, consensus and voluntarism (Bisley 2012). It is a measure of just how disappointing ARF's achievements have been that even one of its original instigators now suggests that 'it would be fair to say that the ARF is still largely stuck in the first groove—dialogue about confidence building — rather than living up to the hopes that by now it would be doing something more substantial' (Evans 2015, 7-9).

As with APEC, the ARF grouping has not met the hopes of some of its champions. Also like APEC, states such as Japan played a role behind the scenes in promoting a concept that might otherwise not have been realized. But it is equally significant and revealing, however, that Japan has subsequently lost confidence in the ARF's ability to actually achieve even its relatively modest agenda of developing confidence-building measures (CBMs) and preventive diplomacy (Yuzawa 2005; Emmers and Tan 2011). This record of limited achievement and influence is explained in part by the ARF membership's lukewarm support of greater transparency, in part by a shift to a greater focus on non-traditional security issues during the 1990s. The privileging of non-traditional security has been driven by both the comparative failure of the ARF's original agenda and by the fact that terrorism assumed such a high priority in the aftermath of September 11 attacks on the US (Yuzawa 2012). If nothing else, the ARF has played a role in keeping the US strategically and institutionally engaged in the region in a way that a majority of ASEAN members find reassuring in the rapidly changing regional security environment.

And yet even in the arguably less demanding and politically fraught area of non-traditional security cooperation, such cooperation as there has been has been limited, piecemeal and undermined by a lack of state capacity and mutual trust. Such progress as there has been has primarily involved disaster relief. Within the narrower ASEAN grouping itself, however, there have been moments when it not only actually seemed capable of acting, but was also prepared to violate its apparently sacrosanct principle of non-intervention (Jones 2012). Although Australian troops may have done most of the heavy lifting during the crisis in what was then East Timor, a number of other ASEAN states played a role in encouraging Indonesia to 'internationalize' the management of the crisis.

Somewhat paradoxically, therefore, the crisis in Timor illustrates the contingent nature of ASEAN's diplomacy. On the one hand, there plainly are examples to be found of ASEAN states violating the sovereignty of member states and 'interfering' in domestic affairs (Jones 2012). On the other hand, however, it is also evident that this is generally only undertaken in extremis and when the alternatives seem even worse. The potential blow to ASEAN's credibility if it completely failed to act would have been very substantial (Dupont 2000). More importantly for the purposes of the present discussion, there is next to no evidence of the larger, ASEAN-inspired ARF grouping doing anything similar, despite the existence of a number of compelling and intensifying security challenges across the region. Before considering how key regional actors and institutions have responded to regional security challenges, however, it is important to say something about the rise of China, which has done more than anything else to transform expectations about the future of regional security.

² The fate of former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's proposed Asia Pacific Community is another illustration of this possibility. A good idea, perhaps, but not one that the ASEAN states felt comfortable about supporting. See Lee and Milner 2014.

The Rise of China

It is hard to overstate the significance of the so-called ‘rise of China’. Even the way we describe this unprecedented and economic and latterly strategic transformation is loaded with significance (Glaser and Medeiros 2007; Zheng 2005). China has been at pains to assure its neighbors that its rise is peaceful, and much more of an opportunity than a threat as far as Southeast Asia in particular is concerned. And yet it is understandable why the much smaller ASEAN economies might feel threatened by the rapid re-emergence of their giant neighbor at the center of East Asian region’s economic and strategic order (Beeson 2013). This was true enough at the height of China’s so-called ‘charm offensive’. In the wake of China’s increasingly assertive policy toward its territorial claims in the South China Sea, however, concerns among some of ASEAN’s maritime states in particular have reached fever pitch. But before considering why China’s recent actions are proving so contentious and potentially destabilizing, it is worth making a few brief remarks about China’s historical role in Asia.

China in Context

The big point to make about China’s rise is that it represents a return to a long-standing historical pattern, rather than an unprecedented regional phenomenon. True, the precise nature of China’s engagement with East and Southeast Asia is of an entirely different order and scope, but the idea that China might be the most powerful actor in the region is hardly new. On the contrary, China occupied a dominant position in a distinctive hierarchical order in what we now think of as East Asia for hundreds of years. The Tribute system that symbolized this order was not only an important symbolic manifestation of China’s ascendancy (Ringmar 2012), but it was instrumental in maintaining stability in the region as a whole. Indeed, for some observers, a ‘strong’ China is not necessarily threatening, but rather a potential source of stability (Kang 2003).

There were initially other, more mundane and less theoretical reasons for thinking positively about the possible significance of China’s rise. From being associated primarily with a potentially destabilizing, revolutionary ideology in the 1960s and ’70s (Van Ness 1970), China rapidly transformed itself into a potentially vital engine of regional economic growth. Significantly, this rapid economic development and domestic reform was accompanied and driven by far-reaching changes in the way China engaged with the rest of the world. On the one hand, economic connections rapidly expanded, facilitated by China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (Lardy 2002). On the other, the way ‘China’ acted and the values it espoused seemed to be changing rapidly as well. There was, in short, ample of evidence of a process of ‘socialization’ occurring, at least at the level of China’s diplomatic elites (Johnston 2003).

The most significant manifestation of this possibility as far as the ASEAN region was concerned was the ‘charm offensive’ in particular and the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA) in particular (Kurlantzick 2007; Chin and Stubbs 2011). China, it seemed, was prepared to go to great lengths and endure some economic cost in order to persuade its Southeast Asian neighbors that it could be trusted and that its new regional prominence was a potentially good thing for the region. In some ways, the ASEAN states had little option other than to come to terms with the underlying material reality that China had rapidly become the most important trade partner for the overwhelming majority of East Asian states – and many others besides (Das 2009). The extent of ASEAN’s growing reliance on China as a key trade partner can be seen in Tables 1 and 2. As Table 1 indicates, China is now by far the largest trading partner for the ASEAN grouping as a whole. Moreover, as Table 2 reveals, for some ASEAN states such as Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia and especially Burma/Myanmar, China is particularly important. No surprise, then, that these countries are often amongst China’s strongest supporters within ASEAN and that such ties represent one of the principal obstacles to achieving consensus on a coherent ASEAN response to China’s actions in the South China Sea.

Table 1

ASEAN Trade By Trading Partner, 2005-2012 (in US\$ Million)

Trading Partner	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
ASEAN	304,825.0	352,872.7	401,913.6	470,230.1	376,213.2	511,019.9	598,377.3	602,048.2
Trading Partner	919,753.1	1,052,359.7	1,208,872.7	1,426,927.0	1,160,663.6	1,496,096.0	1,790,066.7	1,874,379.2
Australia	31,225.1	36,417.3	41,973.5	52,614.1	43,847.7	55,389.4	59,865.5	60,499.1
Canada	5,972.4	8,588.4	9,406.5	10,728.6	9,019.9	9,564.5	10,774.4	12,335.4
China	113,346.6	140,049.4	171,089.0	196,863.3	178,223.1	231,855.6	280,149.8	319,484.8
EU-28	140,731.5	160,977.5	187,307.5	207,803.9	171,431.1	208,588.2	234,621.3	242,598.9
Hong Kong	45,173.8	51,598.8	66,234.9	64,221.1	67,960.2	98,501.0	96,433.9	94,742.4
India	22,997.6	28,718.0	37,243.4	48,840.6	39,075.3	55,383.6	66,191.2	71,815.8
Japan	153,822.6	181,801.8	173,066.0	214,302.5	160,917.8	206,533.8	273,867.2	262,853.7
New Zealand	4,089.4	4,548.9	5,797.0	7,541.1	5,381.4	7,330.7	8,243.9	9,224.8
Pakistan	2,323.1	3,283.2	4,124.1	4,933.7	4,300.9	6,253.7	6,753.2	6,305.6
Republic of Korea	47,958.5	55,949.6	61,208.8	78,294.8	74,771.3	98,580.5	124,402.9	131,030.1
Russia	4,703.1	4,426.1	5,401.5	9,745.1	8,769.0	9,055.9	13,927.5	16,158.2
USA	153,854.2	161,274.3	178,188.7	185,295.1	148,780.1	186,542.7	198,767.4	200,027.2
Rest of the World	193,525.3	236,428.3	165,751.8	345,353.0	250,185.9	324,236.4	414,238.6	436,273.2
Total	1,224,578.2	1,405,232.5	1,610,786.3	1,897,157.1	1,536,876.8	2,009,115.9	2,358,444.0	2,476,427.4

Source: ASEAN Trade Statistics Database as of 20 December 2013

Table 2

China's Trade with ASEAN			
Country	2012 Nominal GDP (US\$ billions)	Chinese Bilateral Trade (US\$ billions)	Share of Chinese Trade in Relations to GDP
Brunei	17	1.5	8.8%
Cambodia	14	2.5	17.8%
Laos	9	2.0	22.2%
Indonesia	879	66.2	7.5%
Malaysia	304	57.0	18.8%
Myanmar	55	4.0	7.3%
Philippines	250	32.0	12.8%
Singapore	277	80.0	28.9%
Thailand	366	70.0	19.1%
Vietnam	156	25.0	16.2%

Source: IMF & Government Websites

The long-term structural transformation and greater integration of the region's economies has meant that the ASEAN states have arguably had little alternative but to have a good working relationship with their principal trade partner. What made this possibility altogether more palatable, however, were the lengths to which China was prepared to go to ingratiate itself with the ASEAN states. ACFTA, in which the Chinese side promised an 'early harvest' of unilateral market opening to the ASEAN economies has been described as a 'masterstroke' of Chinese diplomacy (Ravenhill 2010). For a relatively small amount of economic pain, China was able to

enhance its status as a good, responsible actor in the region's economic affairs.

China had, of course, already demonstrated its importance and reliability during the Asian financial crisis when it resisted the temptation to devalue its own currency and add to the economic and political mayhem (Wang 2003).³ China has also been an important part of new regional initiatives that are designed to encourage economic cooperation, shield the region from future crises or generally reinforce the 'Asian' part of East Asian regionalism (Beeson and Li 2014). Despite serious doubts about just how effective such initiatives might be (Emmers and Ravenhill 2011), for a while, at least, it seemed as if some of China's grand strategic ambitions, especially the goal of reestablishing itself at the center of the regional affairs were going to be realized. Now, however, that rosy picture looks a good deal darker, and China's rise is contributing to 'indirect balancing' strategies that are predicated a continuing, even an enhanced, American commitment to the region (Goh 2008). For this transformation in its fortunes and reputation, at least, China is primarily to blame.

The Return of Geopolitics

For realists, of course, there is nothing surprising about the idea that China's leaders seem to have abandoned Deng Xiaoping's famous axiom about keeping a low diplomatic profile, and unapologetically thrust themselves into the international spotlight. According to the likes of Robert Kaplan and most famously, perhaps, John Mearsheimer, such behavior is the entirely predictable outcome of shifts in the distribution of power in the international system (Kaplan 2012; Mearsheimer 2001; 2010). For Mearsheimer in particular, China's behavior is, in fact, uncannily like America's own when it enunciated the Monroe Doctrine that provided the basis for its regional hegemony on the American continent (Walt 2013; Mearsheimer 2006). In short, asserting themselves as the dominant force in their immediate neighborhoods is what great powers do given half a chance.

It is not necessary to embrace the implicit teleology of such views, or accept all of the theoretical claims of hegemonic transition theory to recognize that China's recent behavior seems to fit the realist bill (Chan 2008; Beeson 2009). There is no doubt that China is adopting a more assertive posture and many observers argue that if China could push the US out of the region this would be an entirely agreeable outcome (Friedberg 2011). For most ASEAN states, however, this is an entirely unwelcome prospect and one that would leave them potentially even more exposed to China's increasingly assertive behavior in the region (Medeiros 2005-06). Reading the intentions of both the US and China is — as ever — a vital task, but one that is not made easier by the opaque nature of the policymaking process in China in particular. Even in the US, frequent changes in policy and administrations, and the long-term erosion of American primacy have raised doubts about America's commitment to the region that first began to emerge in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the enunciation of yet another strategic doctrine by Richard Nixon.

Barack Obama's 'pivot' back to the Asia-Pacific region is clearly a response to the rise of China as a strategic actor, but not one that has entirely convinced some of America's allies. Even within the US itself, critics have lined up to criticize the Obama administration's policy in the Asia-Pacific generally and toward China in particular (Friedberg 2012; Blackwill and Tellis 2015). The US is frequently criticized for having neglected East Asia in favour of more pressing strategic challenges in the Middle East (Ba 2009b). Even when the US has acted and attempted to give greater substance to its strategic rhetoric and reassure nervous allies about its intentions, serious doubts have been raised about American capabilities (Dobbins 2012). In part these are a consequence of China's own growing military capabilities and the development of comparatively cheap and effective weapons systems such as anti-ship missile technologies that directly threaten

³ This was in stark contrast to China's earlier decision to devalue the yuan in 1996 that contributed to regional instability.

America's continuing presence in the region (Newmyer 2010).

In part, they are a function of widespread concerns about America's continuing ability to finance adequately the cost of power projection in the region. The fact that the US relies on continuing inflows of capital from China to underpin its own economic position and ultimately to finance its own strategic commitments is taken as another indicator of relative decline (Layne 2012; Stokes 2013; Schweller and Pu 2011).

But if America's strategic intentions are proving difficult to read for friend and potential foe alike, China's are even more opaque (Jakobson and Knox 2010). One of the key issues here is who is actually in charge of the policymaking process in China, and whether Chinese foreign and strategic policy is actually a product of a coherent, long-term 'grand strategy', or whether it is the ad hoc, improvised and ultimately unpredictable consequence of the intersection and efforts of multiple centers of power and influence in China itself. It is possible to find evidence to support both of these hypotheses and — as is often the way with such things — the reality probably contains elements of each. On the one hand, Xi Jinping has undoubtedly the most powerful leader since Deng Xiaoping, if not Mao Zedong (Economy 2014). It is difficult to imagine that anything as consequential as China's — at times aggressive — policies in the South China Sea could be contemplated, much less enacted without his implicit or explicit approval. On the other hand, however, there is equally no doubt that at the margins of the policymaking process — especially as far as day-to-day operations are concerned — there is a good deal of scope for 'policy freelancing' by a interested parties in various domains.

The excellent, detailed and much cited reports by the International Crisis Group make it clear that a surprisingly wide variety of actors from provincial governments, powerful state owned enterprises, to bureaucratic agencies besides the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), have a hand in influencing the conduct of actions that can be broadly conceived of as foreign policy (ICG 2012a; ICG 2012b). Indeed, MoFA is not even necessarily first among equals in a process in which ultimate responsibility for the formal elements of foreign policy falls with the remit of the 'Foreign Affairs Leading Group', which is chaired by Xi Jinping himself (Jakobson 2013). Significantly, other senior members of the politburo, as well as representatives of various ministries and agencies including foreign affairs, commerce, public security, defense and propaganda make up the Group. While it may be possible to identify at least some of the key players and forces shaping China's policies, it is far more difficult to make predictions about either their future course or their impact on the ASEAN states.

It would be difficult enough for the ASEAN states to act effectively even if Chinese policy was consistent. But over the last few years in particular, Chinese policy toward Southeast Asia has veered from charming to alarming in a remarkably short space of time (Beeson and Li 2012). At the height of the so-called charm offensive, it seemed as if China was determined to make a major effort to reassure the ASEAN states. Over the last few years, however, Chinese policy toward the highly contentious, unresolved and conflicting territorial claims in the South China Sea has become increasingly belligerent (Fravel 2011). While it is difficult to be certain, it seems that a major long-term change of policy direction has been undertaken and presumably authorized at the highest levels in China. The net effect has been to engender a state of alarm and disunity among the ASEAN states (Callick 2014). Just how divisive China's rise has been was revealed in 2012 when the grouping acrimoniously divided over how to respond to the territorial disputes, with mainland Cambodia openly siding with China ahead of its maritime fellow ASEAN states (Storey 2012).

This is not to say that ASEAN hasn't tried to use diplomacy to try and establish an institutional framework with which to manage its increasingly problematic relationship with China. On the contrary, it has. Discussions revolving around the so-called Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) have been underway since 2002 (Thayer 2012). However, as is the way of such things, there has been a good deal of talk but very little in the way of specific proposals,

much less agreements that would actually compel all parties to take seriously a binding code of conduct (Moss 2014). The Philippines government, perhaps the ASEAN state with the most at stake in these disputes declared in 2013 that the process of dialogue and consultation was effectively ‘exhausted’. In the meantime, China’s island building and ‘land reclamation’ efforts have continued to gather pace, effectively transforming the facts on the ground and dividing ASEAN in the process (Otto and Ng 2015).

The Paradoxes of Chinese Policy

The reality of the asymmetrical relationship between China and Southeast Asia was revealed — with unintentional candor, perhaps — by former Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi. Yang stunned the Southeast Asian nations at the 2010 ARF meeting in Hanoi by declaring that ‘China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that’s just a fact’ (Kurlantzick 2011). True enough, no doubt, but hardly in keeping with ASEAN’s preferred mode of face-saving and issue avoidance. Even more consequentially, this unvarnished statement of what the Chinese plainly perceive as geopolitical reality is diametrically at odds with the fiction that the ASEAN countries are ‘in the driving seat’ and filling the region’s purported leadership vacuum. That there is a leadership vacuum in East Asia is undeniable and product of the region’s distinct and often bloody history — a possibility starkly illustrated by the continuing tensions and rivalry between China and Japan. The point to emphasize, perhaps, is that while northeast Asia’s problems may be attributable in part to the absence of effective multilateral institutions (Rozman 2004), their existence in Southeast Asia is plainly no guarantee of harmonious relations or an enhanced problem-solving capacity either.

China’s new geopolitical assertiveness and intransigence is fuelled by a number of factors. First, and most compellingly, the stakes in the South China Sea are incredibly high. While no one knows precisely how much oil, gas, not to mention protein may be available in the region, it could be vast and is clearly a major driver of Chinese policy (Collins and Erikson 2011). This would be significant at any time; in an era of dwindling natural resources and insatiable demand for energy it is critical (Klare 2008) — especially for a government whose authority and legitimacy is almost entirely dependent on continuing economic growth (Yang and Zhao 2014). In addition, there is a growing tide of chauvinistic nationalism in China that makes compromise and backtracking by its leaders politically difficult, if not dangerous (Shi 2015; Wong 2014). Having made such strident assertions about the legitimacy of its rather implausible looking territorial claims, it will be very hard for any government leader in China to backtrack now without an enormous, possibly career-ending loss of face.

In such circumstances, it is difficult to see how the competing Chinese and Southeast Asian positions can be reconciled. China seems irrevocably committed to asserting what it sees as its legitimate claims, even in the face of increasingly forceful declarations from the US about the importance of freedom of navigation, the rule of law, and its willingness to support key allies such as Japan in the event of any conflict in the region (Entous et al. 2015). The fact that a number of key Southeast Asian states such as the Philippines and even Vietnam have been moving to reinforce their strategic ties to the US has done little, it seems, to diminish China’s determination to pursue its own strategic goals. In this regard, ASEAN faces a potentially irreconcilable conflict of its own: the normal ASEAN Way of endless meetings and discussions in the expectation that socialization will occur and agreement will eventually emerge is potentially playing into China’s hands (Otto and Ng 2015). As China continues to reinforce its material presence on the ground it will become increasingly difficult for ASEAN to change the existing material reality, or for China to back down for that matter.

Adding to ASEAN’s difficulties is the fact that China’s foreign policy continues to operate on multiple levels, despite the recent emphasis on provocative direct action and belligerence. At the same time that China is assertively reinforcing its territorial claims, China is simultaneously

promoting the idea of a new institutional architecture with which to provide badly needed infrastructure investment across the region. As part of its ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiative, China’s policymakers are seeking to realize a grandiose reconstruction of former trade links that were formerly centered on China. Significantly for ASEAN, these plans also include a so-called Maritime Silk Road that promises to provide new transport infrastructure throughout Southeast Asia (Zhang 2015). Equally importantly, China has established a new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank with which to finance these new projects (Pilling 2015; Pitlo 2015). For Southeast Asian countries with little at stake in the territorial disputes and potentially much to gain from this new source of funding, ASEAN solidarity may be put to a searching test.

Concluding remarks

There is no doubt that ASEAN has helped to improve relations between the members of the grouping. Although it may be difficult to quantify or demonstrate precise causal relationships it is not unreasonable to infer that the endless meetings and the constant interaction between senior officials and leaders has helped to build a sense of confidence and a degree of solidarity. Even if this has not often translated into specific agreements with tangible outcomes, the process itself clearly matters (Acharya 2011). Indeed, as Jürgen Rüländ points out, Southeast Asia’s distinctive form of regionalization is ultimately ‘less an institutional device for solving cross-border problems through collective action, than for strengthening the region’s nation states through regional resilience’ (Rüländ 2014, 245).

There are, therefore, good reasons not to dismiss lightly an organization that has been around for so long and that its members generally take seriously. And yet there are mounting challenges that demand the sort of immediate, collective and effective responses that ASEAN has generally not been good at. Even within the ASEAN grouping itself there are growing signs of division as the membership struggles to come to terms with the rise of China in particular. The Philippines has become especially exercised about ASEAN’s inability to demonstrate solidarity in the face of a looming external threat from a much more powerful state. This is an especially revealing failing when we remember that this was largely the — albeit unspoken — *raison d’être* for establishing ASEAN in the first place (Leifer 1989).

China’s rise, therefore, poses an existential challenge for ASEAN: if the grouping cannot respond to what it is arguably the most significant challenge since its inauguration nearly half a century ago, then even sympathetic observers might reasonably ask what its relevance and purpose actually is. China, by contrast, has been able to deftly divide and rule, taking advantage of ASEAN’s internal divisions, while simultaneously transforming the very geography of the region ASEAN claims to represent. To be sure, there are aspects of China’s current foreign and security policies that look counter-productive and contrary to its declarations about the benefits of its rise. But it is hard to escape the conclusion that at least some influential Chinese policymakers have made a judgment that the ASEAN grouping can do little to stop its assertive actions in the South China Sea.

When seen in the longer-term sweep of regional history and geopolitics ASEAN’s record looks rather underwhelming and does not suggest that it will be able to collectively rise to the challenge posed by China. On the contrary, in the fifty years since its inauguration, ASEAN’s principal claim to fame, perhaps, is that it continues to exist. In many ways its capacity to actually influence the behavior of its members, much less that of some of the more powerful states in the Asia-Pacific looks less certain than it did in 1967. At that time, at least, ASEAN solidarity was actually promoted by the imperatives of geopolitics and geoeconomics. Now, however, the same forces are exposing divisions and conflicting goals among the membership. Yet if the organization is to have any relevance during the next fifty years, the rise of China is one challenge the grouping may be unable to avoid.

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Anthropology: www.ethno.uni-freiburg.de

History: www.geschichte.uni-freiburg.de

Economics: www.vwl.uni-freiburg.de/iwipol/sopo.htm