
The Asean Way: The Way To Regional Peace?

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Abstrak

ASEAN dianggap sebagai organisasi multilateral yang paling sukses di kawasan Asia, terutama dalam menjaga keamanan regional dan perdamaian. Sebagian besar pengamat internasional berpendapat, meskipun ASEAN tidak menghasilkan terobosan signifikan dan dampak penting dan dianggap menjadi organisasi regional yang tidak efektif. Kunci yang memisahkan ASEAN dengan yang lainnya, dan memungkinkan untuk menjaga perdamaian regional dan kerjasama adalah keterlibatan diplomatik yang unik dengan negara-negara anggotanya, yang dikenal sebagai Jalan ASEAN. Unsur yang paling penting dari ASEAN Way adalah praktek prinsip non-interferensi antara negara-negara anggotanya. Anggota ASEAN menerapkan prinsip ini sejak organisasi didirikan untuk memastikan kedaulatan negara yang berfungsi sebagai ungkapan rasa hormat dan sejajar bagi semua anggota. Artikel ini membahas kemungkinan ASEAN Way dan praktek diplomasi internal untuk diterapkan dalam organisasi regional dan multilateral lainnya. Tujuannya adalah, pertama untuk mengukur dan menganalisa apakah ASEAN Way merupakan latihan yang efektif yang menguntungkan para anggota ASEAN dan kawasan Asia. Jika efektif, sesuai dengan takaran dan ruang lingkup tulisan, penulis tertarik untuk mengamati apakah praktek dapat diterapkan pada organisasi multilateral lainnya. Ini merupakan artikel kualitatif, efektivitas ASEAN Way akan diamati dan dianalisis melalui proses dan hasil dari resolusi konflik di ASEAN. Sumber penelitian berasal dari sebuah perkumpulan literatur akademik di ASEAN dan ASEAN Way serta jurnal dan artikel.

Kata Kunci: ASEAN, organisasi, diplomasi, keamanan, regional, non-intervensi

Abstract

ASEAN is considered as the most successful multilateral organization in the Asia region, especially in maintaining regional security and peace. The majority of the international observers, though, ASEAN has not produced any significance breakthrough and notable impact and thus deemed to be an ineffective regional organization. The key that separates ASEAN with others and allows it to maintain regional peace and co-operation is its unique diplomatic engagement with its member states, known as the ASEAN Way. The most important element of the ASEAN Way is the practice of the principle of non-interference among its member states. ASEAN members practiced this principle since the founding of the organization to ensure state sovereignty that serves as an expression of respect and equal standing for all member countries. This article explores the possibility of ASEAN Way and its practice of internal diplomacy to be applied in other regional or multilateral organizations. The purpose is first to measure and analyse whether the ASEAN Way is an effective practice that benefits the ASEAN members and the Asia region. If the practice is effective, according to the measure and the scope of the paper, the author is interested to observe whether the practice can be applied to other multilateral organizations. This is a qualitative article, the effectiveness of the ASEAN Way will be observed and analysed through the process and the result from conflict resolutions in ASEAN. The source of research comes from a bevy of academic literature on ASEAN and ASEAN Way as well as journalistic paper and articles.

Keywords: ASEAN, organization, diplomacy, security, regional, non-interference

INTRODUCTION

Association of Southeast Asian Nation is a regional organization in the Southeast Asia which was officially formed in Bangkok, Thailand on August 8, 1967. Started by five foreign ministers from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines and Singapore, the organization was established with aims of “*cooperation in the economic, social, cultural, technical, education and*

other fields as well as to promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter.”¹ After almost 20 years, the organization grew by adding more members in the region and became a ten member countries of ASEAN. One study on region purports that what define region should be beyond

geographic areas but also areas of relative homogeneity.² ASEAN members are countries in the Southeast Asia region that shared commonalities such as climate and some cultural characteristics. The critics of ASEAN often considered that these commonalities are less significant compare to economic and development level of member countries. The decision to include the four economically laggard countries that joined in the 90's has negative implication to the organization as a whole.

After decades of its foundation, ASEAN still lacks economic contribution to member countries. Its free trade effort under ASEAN Free Trade Agreement fails to deliver significant economic fruit to the members. Despite ASEAN unsuccessful effort with its aim to cooperate in economic and does not have apparent result of cooperation in other aspects such as social, cultural, technical and education, (as mentioned in the original purpose of the organization) it has maintained peace and promote stability in the region. This article aims first to analyze whether the unique decision-making process of ASEAN, the so called ASEAN Way, is the main contributor for the success. Second, if ASEAN Way is the success key in ASEAN to maintain stability then is it the way to regional peace that can be emulated in other regionalism.

The organization of the article is as follow: In the first section I will define what constitutes as success for ASEAN through observation of the debate between ASEAN ineffectiveness and its proponents that laud the organization as a model of regionalism. The next section describes and explains the ASEAN Way including the origin, definition and whether it contributes to either the success or failure of ASEAN. Following the section, I will explore the possibility of implementing ASEAN Way in other regionalism and whether it will have the same impact to other regional organizations. The last section will conclude the article with the finding that answers the research question on whether ASEAN Way can be the path to regional peace.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

ASEAN is a poster child of idealists that believes

the goods in human nature. ASEAN actors see the regional organization as a forum to achieve cooperation as a way to improve the region as a whole. Idealists view countries and global structure as a "community with the potential to work together to overcome mutual problems."³ Idealism or liberalism theory founded the decision making process in ASEAN since the aim of ASEAN Way is to reach consensus with the common understanding that each country has equal power.

While most organizations, both regional and global are founded on the basis of liberalist theory, there is little disagreement that many organizations operate under realist understanding. SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) for example, is a forum for countries in South Asia that aims to establish cooperation in the region. Indian influence as the largest and most powerful member country hinders the main function of the regionalism. On the other hand, the balance of power and the cultural setting in ASEAN create conducive environment that allows the organization to pursue idealist purpose of the organization. Furthermore, ASEAN Way as a decision making process buttresses the effort that allows member countries to work together and lay the groundwork for cooperative activities.

THE SUCCESS OF ASEAN

Implementing the ASEAN Way in other regional organizations will be challenging but even before we are attempting to include the style of decision-making process to other regional co-operation, we need to observe whether it is an important ingredient for success. In this article, the regional organization is used as the unit of analysis and success is broadly defined as first being able to create or maintain regional peace and stability in order to increase cooperation among members to achieve economic improvement for each member country. ASEAN has been successful in maintaining peace and harmony in the region since its inception in 1967. The declared aim of ASEAN is "the collective will of the nations of Southeast Asia to bind themselves together in friend-

ship and cooperation and, through joint efforts and sacrifices, secure for their peoples and for posterity the blessings of peace, freedom and prosperity.”⁴ ASEAN was born as a regional effort to create stability and as a buttress to fight against the threat of communist ideology in the region. With the recent global development of communism, the organization has achieved its original aim along with its strategic decision to include Vietnam and Laos as ASEAN member in 1995 and 1997. Security serves as the basic requirement for further development and economic cooperation and considering that ASEAN has been successful to maintain regional peace and security it has great potential to continue to create cooperative engagement both internally and externally.

Beyond peace and security areas, ASEAN success is debatable. While some scholars argue that ASEAN is a successful regional organization with impressive achievement,⁵ some others have the opposite opinion. ASEAN often viewed as an organization without teeth, lacking efficiency and has not produced significant accomplishments in terms of binding regional policy. ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, as one example, has not been able to gain benefit out of the free trade cooperation among the ASEAN countries since each member tries to protect its domestic industry that do not deliver notable economic improvement. However, ASEAN has an important role in maintaining friendly and peaceful environment in the region among its members. Aside from small disputes between countries, Southeast Asia has been successful in avoiding regional conflict and serious problems. The largest threat in the region came from an external blow that led to the economic crisis started in 1997 and severely impacted Thailand, Korea and Indonesia. For the latter, the crisis led to a change of regime and the start of democratic progress. Despite the serious economic blow, peace and stability in the region was maintained throughout the crisis.

Based on the original purpose of ASEAN as a group to work against communist infiltration and to maintain regional peace and stability, ASEAN is a successful organization. But if we use different mea-

surement, such as economic or environmental achievement, the organization is short to produce a successful record. Since peace and stability serve as the basic requirement for economic and other type of cooperation, regional peace is key and thus is used in this article as the measurement of success. I believe that countries are interested to pursue at least peaceful relations with their neighbors and aim for regional peace.

ASEAN WAY

Having established that ASEAN has been successful in achieving the basic goal of maintaining regional peace, in this section I will analyze whether the ASEAN Way plays a part in the success. ASEAN Way is a decision-making process that emphasizes on discussion and consensus. It stresses on members equality and the importance of cooperation despite extensive length of time required for discussion to reach an agreement. ASEAN Way has a significant amount of attention from ASEAN scholars and students of Asian region. And while the interpretations vary, Katsumata purports the main elements of the process that consists of the principles of non-interference, non-use of force, quiet diplomacy and consensus approach.⁶ ASEAN Way has been perceived as the main contributor to success and failure of ASEAN. The proponents of ASEAN Way argue that this decision-making process helps the member countries to respect each other and produces peace in the region. As mentioned in the previous section, ASEAN success to keep regional peace meets its original goal as a regional organization and it has been considered as one of the most successful regionalism in the world.⁷ On the other hand, ASEAN Way is often blamed for the organization ineffectiveness and the lack of overt results. The process of decision-making is considered as the main problem that ASEAN is impotent to solve regional issues, especially with the recent episode of unfinished dispute over the South China Sea between China and some ASEAN members.

DECISION-MAKING IN MELAYU VILLAGES AND BEYOND

While some authors argue that ASEAN Way is born out of the local Asian culture such as the decision making process in the Malay villages or Indonesian country sides, we can further observe why the process is being adopted by the head of villagers from the theory perspective.⁸ Malay culture emphasizes strongly on collective culture that includes the process of decision-making. The decision making process is an extension of cultural sense to avoid hurting other people's feeling, to give face and to avoid open conflict. On smaller communities such as a village meeting, head of families are invited to discuss issues that are pertinent to the village and each family representative are encouraged to voice their opinions and to find solutions as a group. The conflict avoidance spirit push heads of families to appear more agreeable and even those who are strongly oppose the proposed argument will voice their concern very carefully with utmost sensitivity or even peppered the opposing opinion with humor. At least this is the common practice of decision making process in many small communities in Indonesia.

Beyond the Melayu villages, the decision making style in organizations in Indonesia is closer to the ASEAN Way than the Western way that focuses on high efficiency. While Western style decision making is the key to effectiveness and productivity, often times in Indonesia, it erodes the sense of community since there is a clear hierarchy that the top management makes decisions without lengthy consultation with the rest of the organizations' member. This is very apparent in organizations that are seemed to be less structural or when the members of the organization are highly opinionated professionals such as lecturers, doctors or journalists. Relationship is placed at a high pedestal in Indonesia and many Asian countries. It is common across the globe that contracts are imperfect but it is even worse in Indonesia and in the Asian region and it produces higher transaction costs, which is materialized in inefficiency, time wasted and lack of productivity. To make up for the imperfect contract,

Indonesians are asking and returning favors and to reach better results, people need to establish and maintain good relationships.

THE PRINCIPLE OF NON-INTERFERENCE

Some ASEAN observers consider the principle of non-interference contributes to the effort in maintaining peace in the region. With this principle, countries have their sovereignty despite of the erratic behavior of one member of the government. Issues such as human right violation and human trafficking in a certain country are considered domestic issue and off limit from involvements from other countries. The principle protects each country from others meddling into the domestic affairs while maintaining cooperation and good relations with the neighboring countries. Only when the issue has some impacts to other countries then the impacted party has the right to stand for itself and interfere in the business. For example environmental issues and forest burning in Indonesia impacted its closest neighbors, Singapore and Malaysia.

ASEAN is not unique in implementing the principle of non-interference since it adopted the principle from the UN Charter, not unlike many other regional organizations such as SAARC. Despite the principle in the ASEAN charter is commonly shared among other regionalism, ASEAN apparently is the one organization that takes it at its face value. It is unclear, though, whether ASEAN is strictly observing the charter or it is mostly part of the culture of the region and member countries. There are critical scholars who view the principle of non-interference as a major hindrance to make institutional changes in ASEAN, especially in the case of human rights violation and violence in member countries.

APPLYING THE ASEAN WAY ELSEWHERE

ASEAN Way might be the path to regional peace for ASEAN but the goal of this article is to observe the possibility of generalization. Can ASEAN Way decision making play a role in promoting regional peace in other regionalism? If ASEAN Way is very

specific to ASEAN due to a number of reasons, it is most likely that ASEAN Way is not the major player in determining ASEAN achievement in regional peace. More precisely, we cannot pinpoint the decision making process as the single ingredient but only within a collection of factors that contribute to the regional peace. On the other hand, ASEAN Way is possible in ASEAN because of supporting condition that is unique for the organization.

Several reasons why the consensus decision making process is viewed as a necessity are first, since the member countries are putting heavy emphasis on maintaining sovereignty of each country that state actors are honoring other members' by the long and often called as ineffective process to reach a common understanding. Second, ASEAN is a community of equal power. There is no one single country in ASEAN with significantly more power than the rest. Singapore is for the most part the wealthiest country in ASEAN, it is considered as a very small country that it will not be seen as a strong country. Meanwhile, Indonesia as the largest country in geographical and population sense is mired with domestic struggles such as corruption and a lack of economic strength. The two countries strengths and weaknesses provide balance of power in the region that makes ASEAN Way decision making continues to be the style in ASEAN. Lastly, ASEAN member countries shared similar culture that separates them from other parts of the world. As mentioned earlier, some argues that ASEAN Way is derived from the Malay villages both in Indonesia, Malaysia and possibly Brunei. The culture is brought to countries with relatively large Malay's community such as Singapore and Philip-pines. Some argue that the argument is not reliable because the domestic decision making process in each country is, unlike the ASEAN Way, formal and institutionalized.⁹ As a counter argument, my personal observation in decision making process in organization with less obvious leader or when the power is more equally spread among members, the decision making process is closer to the ASEAN Way.

OTHER REGIONALISM

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is a regional organization with 7 member countries in the region. It was founded in 1985 with 7 member countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. The first chapter of SAARC stated desire in "promoting of peace, stability, amity and progress through strict adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter and Non-Alignment."¹⁰ Other shared similarity with ASEAN is the principle of non-interference as stated in the official SAARC as one of the three main principles. Through the statement, ASEAN and SAARC shared at least one similar goal and value yet the achievements are very far apart. ASEAN is often viewed as the model regionalism mostly due to the organization's accomplishment in maintaining peace. On the other hand, SAARC is advised to learn from ASEAN.¹¹ The regional organization faces many challenges including the most fundamental element to the regional cooperation that is to maintain peace and stability in the region. The region is laden with conflicts that according to Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), South Asia is one of the most violent regions in the world. The conflict ranges from internal issues in Jammu and Kashmir in India, conflict in Sri Lanka to armed conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Observers who urge SAARC to learn from ASEAN do not propose SAARC to adopt the ASEAN Way to solve the regional problem and achieve the functionality of the organization. Instead, SAARC can adopt the ASEAN strategy in identity building and to promote more balance of power among member countries.

India, by far is the largest and the most powerful member of SAARC that the other members are constantly strategizing to blunt Indian influence and creating internal disunity. ASEAN Way as a consensus decision making may function as conflict prevention mechanism for SAARC, something that the organization lacks.¹² Mohanan argues for SAARC to learn some lessons from ASEAN in order to function as a solid organization facing external relations. He suggests that

SAARC learn from ASEAN's guidelines and constant consultations among members to increase the sense of community and strengthen internal cooperation.¹³ The most important lessons from the ASEAN experience that contribute to community formation are its informality, consultations and patience.

While the writer does not suggest SAARC to adopt the ASEAN Way but the three contributing factors mentioned are the characters of the ASEAN Way. The organization strives to create friendly and conducive community to allow cooperation. By this standard, we can conclude that the Mohanan suggests ASEAN Way in some way, and most likely with some adjustments, is applicable to SAARC. It may not be the panacea of all problems in SAARC but it will contribute to community building, a necessary ingredient for successful cooperation as a regional organization.

Consensus base decision making is not unique to ASEAN, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) also adopt the practice.¹⁴ ASEAN Way is unique because it is beyond consensus decision making that includes a long winded discussion and consultation to reach common understanding. This whole process is often viewed as significantly ineffective yet it provided the necessary environment where all members' voices, opinions including objections are heard and considered that even those who do not support the final decision will accept it.

CONCLUSION

ASEAN as a regional organization with ten member countries was founded with the main goal to protect its region against the infiltration of communist ideology. The organization is considered as one of the most successful regionalism in the world with impressive accomplishments. While this is debatable since there are arguments on the other side of the spectrum, we can agree that ASEAN has been successful in maintaining peace and stability in the region. This particular success is credited to the ASEAN Way as the decision making process that is unique to the organization. ASEAN Way conducts decision making

through long discussion and consultation process in order to reach common understanding of the agenda. With this process, members are given ample time for dialogue to express their reservation or disagreement and to come to the best consensus solution that is at least perceived to be best for all. Such decision making process is conducive to create the sense of community and unity among members in the organization. This style of decision making can be applied to other regionalisms such as SAARC that needs this sense of community to face external powers with more solid unity.

ASEAN Way is not panacea to all regionalism and even for ASEAN, it has drawback such as long winded ineffective meetings. We need to further observe the cost and benefit of the method to avoid putting one emphasis on creating community yet sacrifice productivity that I categorized as part of the transaction costs. Some regional organizational settings, ASEAN Way style of decision making is a necessity to create the basic sense of community as the foundational element for cooperation. The extent of dialogue and consultation can also vary according to the cultural condition of the regions. ASEAN and SAARC being the regions in the East with strong non-verbal communication emphasis can benefit more with the style of decision making for community building purpose. On the other hand, regional organization with verbal communication culture may find the long meeting and discussion sessions to be very ineffective that cause the loss of productivity. To sum up, I believe that regional organizations may benefit from ASEAN Way decision making process if they consider that the process is necessary to their situation and needs. Otherwise, without the appropriate cultural setting, it will not deliver the intended benefit but instead it will cost the organization time and productive results.

ENDNOTES

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- ³ Joshua Goldsten and Jon Pevehouse, *International Relations*. Pearson,

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- ⁴ ASEAN Website: History
- ⁵ Nischalke, Tobias Ingo.. "Insights from ASEAN's Foreign Policy Co-operation: The "ASEAN WAY", a Real Spirit or a Phantom?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, No 22, 1 (2007).
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- ¹² Pilai, Raman, "Tensions Within Regional Organizations: A Study of SAARC." *The Indian Journal of Political Science*. 50 (1989).
- ¹³ Mohanan, B. "Community Formation in SAARC's External Relations: Lessons from ASEAN." *Indian Political Science Association*. 51 (1990).
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