

# ASEAN's Role and Potential in East Asian Integration: Theoretical Approaches Revisited

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Theoretical interpretation of the role and potential of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) remains controversial. Three salient theoretical approaches, neo-realist, neo-liberal, and domestic factors, have provided crucial explanations of ASEAN's weaknesses. These attributes, however, lack essential analytical tools to interpret ASEAN's role and potential in creating regionalism and regionalization in East Asia in the post-Cold War era. Given both theoretical and operational levels, constructivism is a predominant approach to portray the role and potential of ASEAN, particularly the role it plays in creating an increasingly connected web of cooperation and in managing the regional frameworks and arrangements with its founding principles and norms. While the endeavour on regionalization driven by the ASEAN Way and principles is impressive, the 2008-adopted Charter has marked a crucial step in ASEAN's institutional and political development for regionalism. The marginalization of the ASEAN Way, however, remains a default norm. Thus, much needs to be done to bring about strong political will and commitment *per se* toward the realization of the ASEAN Community and toward East Asian regionalism.

*Keywords:* theoretical approaches, the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Way, regionalization, regionalism

Explaining the role and potential of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) remains controversial theoretically. Neo-realists tend to focus on security and treat the balance of power as a key determinant of regional affairs and to be skeptical about the regional security management role played by ASEAN and about prospects for peaceful change. Neo-liberal theorists tend to prioritize their position on economic and institutional evolution and put their claims on ASEAN-driven regional projects characterized by low institutionalized frameworks and arrangements, thus leading to lacking high commitment required by institutions *per se*. While the two theoretical approaches are the major theoretical attributes to explain weaknesses of ASEAN in East Asian integration, domestic factors play a crucial role in capturing the understanding of interplay and interrelations between the impact of regionalism/regionalization and state behavior. Unlike the three above salient approaches, constructivist advocates focus their attention on ASEAN's ideational factors like norms, ideas, identity, and other cultural attributes through social-driven processes which contribute a great deal to creating an increasingly connected web of cooperation and which helps in turn enhance interaction of state actors for regional cooperation.

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This paper employs these four theoretical approaches to interpret the role and potential of ASEAN in the course of East Asian regionalism and regionalization. It argues that each theoretical approach offers crucial examinations of ASEAN's weaknesses, its analytical tools to interpret ASEAN's role and potential in East Asian regionalization and regionalism, however, are comparatively weak. Given both theoretical and operational levels, however, constructivism is a predominant approach to portray the role and potential of ASEAN, particularly the role it plays in creating an increasingly connected web of cooperation and in managing the regional frameworks and arrangements with its founding principles and norms in both economic and politico-security domains. Besides its role in creating regionalization through social-driven processes, pressures imposed on the need for institutional strengthening as a regional emerging vehicle and as a relevant international organization have given rise to the ASEAN leaders' desire to codify its norms and rule to assert the association's centrality in East Asian regionalism. Yet, such a rule-based institution does not necessarily lead to structural changes on the ground. The 2008 ASEAN Charter reveals the marginalization of the ASEAN Way, rather than the strengthening of institutional capacity *per se*.

### **A Search for a Plausible Theoretical Framework**

Theoretically speaking, neo-realism has no interest in both regional organizations and regional cooperation, which, if available, are viewed only as a means for balancing and bandwagoning. As a result, neo-realists tend to downplay ASEAN's role and to be pessimistic about the potential of ASEAN as an organization and about its driven regional cooperation. They hold the view that ASEAN lacks the capacity either to compel its members to comply with the organization rules or encourage its East Asian neighbors to follow its prescriptions for regional behavior. This implies that ASEAN matters little to East Asian economic and security relations and must rely on external major powers, principally the United States, to maintain regional security and to promote economic development (Muthiah Alagappa, 2003; Buzan, 2003, pp. 143-173; Ikenberry & Tsuchiyama, 2002, pp. 69-94; Hund, 2003, pp. 383-418). Michael Leifer, for example, claimed that "ASEAN was an underdeveloped institution" (Leifer, 1989, p. 150). As for the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), it was "an imperfect diplomatic instrument for achieving regional security goals" (Leifer, 1996, p. 53) and should be viewed "as a modest contribution to a viable balance or distribution of power within the Asia Pacific by other traditional means" (Leifer, 1996, p. 59). In particular, in the aftermath of 1997-1998 Asian crisis, Jones and Smith held the view that "The economic crisis has exposed ASEAN's constituting incoherence as an imitation community when ASEAN has proven unable to contend with the pressures exerted by the global information age or the violent internal challenges" (Jones & Smith, 2001, p. 285).

However, advocates of neo-realism lack analytical tools to investigate ASEAN's role and potential of creating regionalization and regionalism. First, neo-realism fails to provide a plausible account for ASEAN's capacity in uniting all East Asian countries together to move the pace of East Asian integration forward over the past two decades. It is undeniable that in the early years of its inception, ASEAN lacked its capacity to galvanize their members into action as a united diplomatic front and primarily depended on US for security linchpin and economic patronage because of counter-communist insurgencies campaign driven by the United States and because ASEAN experienced source of inter-state tensions, such as Malaysia-Philippines conflict over Sabah island, Singapore-Malaysia tensions over water supply, Vietnam's military intervention in Cambodia, and so on. The end of the Cold War, however, gave impetus to the ASEAN's leaders to strengthen regional peace, cooperation, and development, get better control of their own strategic environment and to

enhance ASEAN's role in regional and global affairs. In political domain, ASEAN played a major role in the peace talk process on Cambodia. Through the Jakarta Informal Meeting I, II, and III, ASEAN contributed a great deal to the reconciliation process between the four Cambodian factions as well as the facilitation of peace talks between Indochinese states and ASEAN counterparts. The ASEAN diplomatic resolution had created a prerequisite for a comprehensive political solution to the Cambodian question in 1991. The political solution to the Cambodian problem gave rise to a steady warming of relations between Indochinese states and the ASEAN founding members in the early 1990s and paved the way for the inclusion of Vietnam to the association and the resultant accession of Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia in the latter half of the 1990s. The creation of a "greater ASEAN" has since then opened up a new era of regional cooperation and development regardless of different socio-political systems. These political developments have created peaceful and stable environment in Southeast Asia conducive to regional economic growth and politico-security cooperation, as well as enhanced ASEAN's role in the Asia-Pacific. In economic domain, given incentives for regional economic integration, mainly the establishments of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) and the Common European Market, the ASEAN leaders responded with the two significant initiatives: Mahathir's proposal for an East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC) in early 1990 and the establishment of ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 1992, along with the diplomatic resolution to the Cambodian question. In the first place, Mahathir's EAEC idea for an "Asian only" grouping<sup>1</sup>, though unfeasible at that time, at least created a shared perception among East Asian countries of the first concept of their own region. This was evident once the EAEC idea had been one of the central points for discussions at all ASEAN Ministerial Meetings, the Post-Ministerial Meetings (PMC), and informal gatherings in the subsequent years. This incentive laid the groundwork for the 1997 creation of ASEAN Plus Three (APT) to engage China, Japan, and South Korea as ASEAN partners into regional affairs. Since the evolution of APT process, ASEAN has been at the driver's seat and as the driving force of the East Asian community-building, starting with East Asia Summit (EAS) which involves major regional powers and other major and great powers outside the region<sup>2</sup>. Notably, the ASEAN Way and principles have become the emerging norms for the operation of all regional institutions, including the ASEAN-driven ARF and, to a lesser extent, the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation). Second, neo-realists have reasonable claims on ASEAN's inability to address the 1997-1998 economic crisis, which had "spill-over" effect on socio-political upheavals and security concerns in its aftermath. Consequently, the ASEAN member states more or less became divisive and partially lost its reputational image, not to mention its inability to address the 1997-1998 Asian forest fires initiating in Indonesia and subsequently spreading to some parts of its member countries. However, neo-realists ignored the fact that it is the absence of US regional commitment and US-dominated International Monetary Fund (IMF) policy imposed on ASEAN member states during the crisis that gave rise to regional incentives for closer cooperation to dilute their dependence on external players. This incentive was

<sup>1</sup> At that time, Mahathir EAEC idea defined East Asia to mean Northeast Asia, including China, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and Southeast Asia—ASEAN 6. The initiative appeared to be an economic forum for the East Asian region that excluded the participation of external powers, namely Anglo-Saxon regional powers such as the United States and Australia. Also, EAEC would function as a link to promote deep penetration of regional economies and regional integration, and at the same time to lay foundation for the future development of the East Asian economies in response to the European Union (EU) and NAFTA. See more detail in Takashi Terada. (2003). Constructing an "East Asian" concept and growing regional identity: From EAEC to ASEAN+3. *The Pacific Review*, 16(2), 255.

<sup>2</sup> The EAS includes the 10 ASEAN member states plus China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand, and most recently US and Russia. The APT and the EAS are the foundations for a long-term EAC building. Since the first EAS held in Kuala Lumpur in December 2005, there has been a general consensus that the APT process over the long term "would remain the main vehicle toward the long-term goal of building an East Asian Community, with ASEAN as the driving force".

evident when ASEAN played a dominant role in creating a connected web of cooperation with a series of regional frameworks and arrangements in the aftermath of the crisis, such as ASEAN Plus One (APO), the APT, the EAS, the establishments of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) between ASEAN and each of the three Northeast Asian partners, along with agencies to address similar future challenges, and so on. Pempel (2005) is convinced to argue that while US remains dominant in security, it lost much of previous power in trade and investment... and that *ad hoc* problem-oriented bodies including the public, semipublic, and private sectors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), other forces as part of civil society, such as religious fundamentalists, professional associations, track II epistemic community, etc., from many regional countries have greatly contributed to addressing specific problems and proposal for regional solutions (Pempel, 2005, pp. 1-28). Third, regarding neo-realist claims on the ARF, it has offered a crucial explanation in a sense that since its establishment in 1994, the ASEAN-driven ARF has not played any significant role in managing or resolving traditional conflicts, while non-traditional security threats has been addressed at sluggish pace. However, avoidance of sensitive issues that can arouse discontent among regional countries is the principle of this ASEAN-driven mechanism. Because of the historical irritants and animosity and existing unsolved problems between regional countries, as well as ASEAN's wariness of regional competitive leadership calculations of non-Southeast Asian regional powers, principally the United States, China, and Japan, the ASEAN Way and norms, especially the principle of non-use or threat of force, non-intervention in domestic affairs, and consensus-based decision-making, have contributed a great deal to peace and stability of the region for the over past four decades and to diluting any single power's ambition of regional dominance. For this reason, ASEAN's pursuit of confidence-building measures and preventative diplomacy, while making a gradual move at a pace comfortable to all on the basis of the consultative process and the inclusiveness principle in security dialogue and cooperation, has in fact played a crucial role as the "glue" to bring together all major powers in Northeast Asia and non-East Asian countries into security issue forum. This phenomenon has created significant conditions conducive to deepening regional integration and provided a good avenue for ASEAN to get better control of their own strategic environment. In addition, the balance or distribution of power was relevant during the Cold War, especially during the Indochina Wars. In the post-Cold War era, however, most of the ASEAN member states embrace independent foreign policy. Even the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore, may endorse a soft or limited form of the US primacy to ensure their government legitimacy and autonomy, as well as and to ensure regional security. In other words, balance of power or collective security is not viewed as a rational choice for the ASEAN leaders since it involves rival great powers, particularly Sino-American relations (Ciorciari, 2009, pp. 168-175). This momentum has characterized the ASEAN-driven ARF and set out strategic orientations for the ASEAN Security Community by 2015 into "common", not collective, security. John David Ciorciari (2009) is convinced that since the end of the Cold War, the balance of power has transformed into the balance of influence, not in military, but in economic, institutional, and ideational dimensions. ASEAN has succeeded in shaping an order in which no single great power can easily exercise unwanted dominance (Ciorciari, 2009, pp. 157-159). In other words, the post-Cold War foreign policy of the ASEAN member states has been to pursue a relatively non-aligned approach or limited alignment to stay in a neutral favorable position between the US and China. As a result, the role of regional security arrangements has helped reduce their alignment with the US, enhancing intra-regional defense cooperation and confidence building measures as well as building stronger regional cohesion and clout. In pursuit of limiting alignment with external great powers, this mechanism has been to create multiple lines of defense, while

pursuing measures of accommodation with China in the present and hedging against the possible threat of China and the United States in the future.

Neo-liberal advocates, in terms of regionalization, by and large emphasize the significance of transnational integration of corporations and private businesses that help create trans-border networks, preceding intergovernmental cooperation. Keiichi Tsunekawa (2005) claimed that private companies and business people connected by business networks came to be powerful promoters of governmental cooperative measures aimed at reducing transaction costs and other business impediments (Keiichi Tsunekawa, 2005, pp. 101-112). Also, Gamble and Payne (1996, p. 334) argued that the most important driving forces (in regionalization)... come from markets, from private trade and investment flows, and from the policies and decisions of companies (Keiichi Tsunekawa, 2005, p. 105). This contention is convinced in a sense that since the early 1990s, given consideration on the establishments of NAFTA and the European Common Market (ECM) that could exert negative impact on ASEAN competitive advantage, the ASEAN leaders came up with the establishment of AFTA as a single production unit to forge ahead regional economic integration by enhancing intra-regional economic linkage and strengthened competitive advantage *vis-à-vis* other economic blocs. Since the middle 1990s, given adaptation of economic policies and institutions of ASEAN member states to facilitate trade liberalization under the AFTA framework, there have been increasingly integrating transnational networks of corporations and private sectors through regional trade, investment, and cross-national production networks. Spurred by this trend, there are a large number of intra-regional FTAs. Until now, 16 FTAs [including PRC (People's Republic of China)-Macao Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement—CEPA and PRC-Hong Kong CEPA] have been concluded (those signed or under implementation), 04 FTAs have been under official negotiation; and 06 FTAs have been proposed. These trade schemes, however, imply that regional governments of Southeast Asia have been key agents to drive certain degree of the region's integrative activities in order to enhance intraregional economic complementarities, on the one hand, and to make best use of external economies' cooperation, on the other hand. T. J. Pempel (2005) asserted that even though regionalization (primarily non-state actors-based bottom-up activities) which incorporates multinational corporations, NGOs, private businesses, private citizens engaged in track II processes, and so on, are the key spinners of the region's web of cooperation, more cooperative ventures have been driven by the national governments of the region (Pempel, 2005, pp. 1-28). In fact, this also represents a partial explanation in constructivist view, as Keiichi Tsunekawa (2005) put it, "Trans-border networks is based on both liberal and constructivist view" (Keiichi Tsunekawa, 2005, p. 105). In other words, while non-state actors (regionalization) are the key spinners of the region's web of cooperation, state actors who laid out frameworks and schemes (regionalism) are the key drivers. In institutional dimension (regionalism), neo-liberals assume that very few ASEAN governments have pressed for an extensive institutionalization of their cross-border ties in any field. They claimed that cross-border cooperation driven by the ASEAN Way has been characterized by poorly institutionalized organization. As a result of ASEAN-initiated low institutionalized frameworks and arrangements, ASEAN member states tend to depend deeply on external players, especially the US, the newly industrialized countries (NICs), and the EU (European Union). It is true to claim that political determination and degree of commitment of the ASEAN leaders are not high enough as binding and rule-based institution in the EU. However, it does not necessarily mean ASEAN are not capable enough to promote regional economic linkage and integration. ASEAN states have sought to make a gradual progress and to move at a pace comfortable to all because of their uneven levels of developments and different economic backgrounds. This is particularly driven by ASEAN's

strategy to develop a bargaining style—the ASEAN Way—that emphasizes cooperation despite low levels of institutionalization and legalization, while creating sequential issue-by-issue coalitions. Acharya (2005) argued that, as the region began to record exceptional rates of economic growth, trade and investment cooperation reinforced the impetus toward closer relations (Acharya, 2005, p. 98). John D. Ciorciari (2009) claimed that ASEAN states have generally sought to steer a middle path in economic affairs between great powers to create a web of economic interdependence so that powerful external actors develop clear stakes in regional peace and stability (Ciorciari, 2009, pp. 157-196). ASEAN's push for the realization of its Economic Community by 2015, which is pursued to emerge as a single market and simultaneously strengthening its economic relations with external economies, has demonstrated this strategy. In 2005, China became the fourth biggest trading partner with ASEAN (after the U.S., Japan, and the EU). In 2008, however, Japan and China remained the ASEAN's first and the third biggest trading partners with total trade valued at US\$211,915.5 million and US\$192,672.0 million, respectively, accounting for over one-third of ASEAN's total trade with external partners. Thus, the United States is no longer number-one partner as it used to be<sup>3</sup>. In addition to these, neo-liberals tend to downplay national sovereignty and view the globalization as a process which narrows the scope of state control in areas within its national boundaries. In similar fashion, Ohmae Kenichi (1991) argued that the emerging power of customers and the evolution of cross-border multinational companies and corporations lead to the declining authority of state because of state's inability to control the impersonal forces of market economy and that (the authority or control) of governments is "the major obstacle for people to have the best and cheapest from anywhere in the world" (Ohmae Kenichi, 1991, pp. 1-16). However, the fact has shown that many of ASEAN member states embrace market-oriented economy, while sovereignty and regime security are ensured. This common model of the developmental states in Southeast Asia implies that in the course of regional and global economic integration, the government plays a crucial role in regulating and controlling the impersonal forces of the market economy and attaches much importance to national sovereignty. ASEAN norms of consensual decision-making and the principle of mutual respect of territorial integrity, as well as non-intervention in domestic affairs have demonstrated this impetus. In other words, while states can access to economic resources that enable them to develop their economies and improve national standards of living, states can also gain overall political legitimacy and seek to limit their exposure to international forces when they perceive those forces as threats to regime control and national sovereignty, as Pempel (2005) put it, "The collective improvement in ASEAN's international standing economically has not been accompanied by the rapid eclipse of national self-interest and Westphalian sovereignty" (Pempel, 2005, p. 12).

Apart from the two mentioned approaches, domestic factors play a significant role in exerting influence on East Asian integration. Equally important, domestic factors are deeply impacted by this process. Robert O. Keohane and Helen V. Milner (1996), and Peter Gourevitch (1978) argued that the internationalization is having profound effects on domestic politics. Governments also respond to international pressure in return so as to improve the competitive advantages and the rapid adaptation of their domestic variables equitable to internationalization. This is the interplay and interrelation between internationalization and domestic institutions (Keohane & Milner, 1996, pp. 1-24; Gourevitch, 1978, pp. 883-911). In Southeast Asia, economic integration is more or less driven by politics rather than economics. Jayasuriya (2003) claimed that any attempt to promote a free trade area in Southeast Asia has inevitably encountered impediments from governments under

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<sup>3</sup> ASEAN Secretariat. (2009). *ASEAN Database*. Retrieved from <http://www.aseansec.org/stat/Table19.pdf>.

the banner of “national interests” and that regional integration is seen as a “political project” undertaken by domestic actors (Jayasuriya, 2003, pp. 339-355). In fact, questions relating to liberalisation of the free flow of trade and capital seemed to pose a major barrier to ASEAN economic integration in the 1990s as it involved political sensitivity, nationalist sentiments, domestic constituencies, and national constitutions. In particular, because of differences in the economic structures, business and state interests, and because of internally growing issues, especially state-society relations, the ASEAN member states tended to attach the vital importance to domestic stability rather than regional common interests as a whole. These factors had led to lacking trans-border cooperation on problem-solving and strength of participants’ commitment to regional cooperation. Domestic factor approach is therefore paramount to understand the challenges to ASEAN linkage and integration. There is no smaller matter. The vast diversities in terms of political systems, cultures, ethnicities, religions, and levels of development reveal the complexities of state behavior. Against this background, one cannot ignore the fact that over the past decade, the ASEAN national governments have endorsed adaptation and transformation of its domestic institutions to further integrate into regional projects under the AFTA framework and the APO trade schemes. In addition, the evolution of regional frameworks and arrangements, along with enormous meetings, has strengthened governments’ interactions and close cooperation for regional common interests. ASEAN states’ impressive economic growth has created stronger incentive for further cooperation. ASEAN efforts to transform the organization into a more ruled-based institution, especially since the 2008 entry into force ASEAN Charter, and the push for the establishment of ASEAN Community by 2015, will strengthen regional governments’ commitment to their declared agreements and objectives.

The analysis above implies that the most significant approach for interpreting the role and potential of ASEAN is constructivism. The primary focus of constructivist advocates is on ideational factors like norms, ideas, identity, and other cultural attributes through social-driven processes which contribute to increasingly connected web of cooperation and to enhanced interaction of state actors for regional cooperation. They tend to stress ASEAN’s role in regional affairs by focusing on the critical importance of the norms and identity that ASEAN has promoted in the course of its drive to encourage regional cooperation. Acharya (2005) argued that “Norms and identity are not the only determinants of regionalism in Southeast Asia, they are a central determinant” (Acharya, 2005, p. 98). Tan and Cossa (2001) suggested that the imprint of the ASEAN Way on the ARF may contribute to the social construction of a pan-East Asian identity in the future (Tan & Cossa, 2001, p. 35). In similar fashion, Timo Kivimaki (2011) offered a very interesting account to explain the importance of the ASEAN Way as the dominant norm of ASEAN which has resulted in sharp reduction of battle deaths and conflicts since the 1967 inception of ASEAN and suggests that the possibility of East Asian relative peace be driven by the ASEAN Way since 1979 (Kivimaki, 2011, pp. 57-85).

In fact, the principles of the 1976 ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC or Bali Treaty), including non-use or threat of force, non-intervention in another one’s domestic affairs, peaceful settlement of mutual dispute, mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and effective cooperation, appear to be crucially ensuring regional peace and stability, as well as exerting crucial impact on the operations of regional institutions in East Asia. As discussed above, the ASEAN principles have contributed great deal to harmonizing diverging interests of the member states and to ensuring regional peace and stability over the past four decades. This achievement has been based on several factors. First, the principles have been well suited to foreign policies of the ASEAN member states once sovereignty and keeping the ruling regime in power are of

particular concern in a market-oriented economy. Second, the principles have been in a good match with the regional context in which a vast diversity in cultures, socio-political systems and disparity in levels of economic development, as well as unsolved territorial issues really persist. Third, the principles have been more in line with the ASEAN member countries' desire to create a peaceful and stable environment in Southeast Asia conducive to economic development. In addition to its principles, the ASEAN norms have constituted a significant part in fostering governmental interactions and regional cooperation. Needless to say, more than yearly 200 meetings of ASEAN and other forums, alongside with ASEAN summit meetings have strengthened interaction among regional governments. It is also generally believed that consensual decision-making and informal meetings of government leaders and officials have brought about internal solidarity, formulating a regional identity in Southeast Asia. Regional socialization has also played a significant role in fostering mutual understanding among the government leaders which have laid stepping-stone groundwork for further regional cooperation. The process has been driven by ASEAN regional meetings, informal gatherings, series of personal contacts among ASEAN officials, golf playing, and karaoke singing, and so on. In other words, regional socialization has evolved as new means to promote regionalism through improvement of regional consciousness and regional identity building. Acharya (2003) asserted that collective identity building may "take off from socialization processes undertaken self-consciously by actors who, despite of social and cultural differences, to pursue common objectives" (Acharya, 2003, pp. 210-421). In addition, constructivist adherents highlight ASEAN's ability of socialization in engaging key regional players, particularly China, in regional cooperation, making them see themselves as regional multilateral players, thus eroding unwanted dominance. T. J. Pempel (2005) argued that regionalism and regionalization have enhanced connections across East Asia driven by the national governments of the region on the one hand, and multinational corporations, private sectors, NGOs, other forces as part of civil society, on the other (Pempel, 2005, pp. 1-28). Besides, the ASEAN principles and norms have been emerging as the determinants on the operation of regional institutions in East Asia. This is evident as in the case of the ASEAN-driven ARF, the ASEAN PMC, the APT process, and the EAS. For these reasons, it can be said that ASEAN is likely to gain regional autonomy in East Asian regionalism and regionalization process.

Constructivism, however, reveals some weak points. First, though literature and official statements, both in public and private, have suggested a sense of shared identity, there have been cases in which domestic factors tended to be a barrier. In retrospect, there were a number of violations of the ASEAN norms, mainly non-intervention and non-use of force, such as Indonesia's violation of the sovereignty norm *vis-à-vis* East Timor in 1975 and 1999; Kuala Lumpur's and Jakarta's changed positions on Manila's policies toward Muslims in the Southern Philippines. This implies that state identity fundamentally shapes state preferences or actions, rather than regional identity, and that norms may therefore be best understood as standards of behavior given a particular identity and relationship. Second, in a wider context, if the ASEAN Way and norms are viewed as a spill-over effect on pan-East Asia, then what about conflicting responses to the ASEAN Way between China and US—the former stressing its *simpatico* approach to multilateral institutions and the later emphasizing more energetic liberal reforms in East Asia? Third, it has not been at all easy to identify a regional identity because the countries in the region are diverse with three major world religions—Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism. Regional countries are also at different stages of economic developments, and even political ideologies are not always in conformity. Vast diversity is the major characteristic of the region, and to promote a regional identity has meant to promote "unity in diversity". However, ASEAN displays complexities in



behavior, which resulted in the contingent interaction between the material (power, territory, and wealth) and the ideational (rules, ideas, and identity) aspects, as member states tend to actively seek to manage domestic order as well as regional order within and beyond ASEAN.

To sum up, each approach has its own strong points and weak points to interpret the role and potential of ASEAN in East Asian integration. In other words, the four approaches are mutually complementary to capture an overall picture of plausible interpretation of the role and potential of ASEAN. However, constructivism appears to be predominant. This approach will be further supported in the next section by examining the three core characteristics—informality, flexible consensus, and open regionalism that ASEAN has conducted since its inception. In particular, the section examines the marginalization of the ASEAN Way as a default norm, in spite of rhetoric about the strengthening of ASEAN institutional capacity in light of the ASEAN Charter.

### **Characteristics of ASEAN: Regional Identity Versus Regionalism**

It is generally argued that the characteristics of ASEAN are driven by the ASEAN Way and norms, along with the principles contained in the TAC. Taken together, these consist of informality, reliance on *musjawarah* and *mufakat* (Malay-style consultation and consensus), consensus-building, incrementalism, building on personal and political relations, saving face, avoidance of arbitration mechanisms in dispute resolution, and emphasizing process over substance, and the five principles of the TAC. The ASEAN Way and norms are likely to create ASEAN collective identity. In fact, the ASEAN Way and norms, as discussed above, have contributed a great deal to creating an increasingly connected web of cooperation and have exerted profound impacts on almost all regional arrangements and forums in the East Asian integration process. These norms are manifested in the three following core characteristics of ASEAN, including informality, flexible consensus, and open regionalism and cooperative security. Such a norm-based regional identity, however, might trigger a major barrier to the member states' commitment *per se* to declared agreements and ASEAN leaders' rhetoric. Although an urgent need for institutional strengthening is generally endorsed by the member states to forge ahead a new step of ASEAN's evolution in East Asian regionalism and in the course of realizing the ASEAN Community, the marginalization of the ASEAN Way in the 2008-adopted ASEAN Charter triggers doubts and skeptics about changes *per se* on the ground.

### **Informality**

In Southeast Asia, member states have been cooperating through informal understandings that impose no legally binding obligations. ASEAN's founding document, the Bangkok Declaration of August 1967, was merely a declaration of two pages setting forth the ends and means of ASEAN and of regional cooperation. The foreign ministers of the five founding states signed it, which required no ratification. The slow, cautious start of ASEAN was understandable because the five founding members still nursed historic animosities toward and suspicions of one another. Lipson (1991, p. 500) claimed that "Informality is best understood as a device for minimizing the impediments to cooperation, at both domestic and the international levels" (Solingen, 2005, p. 32). To the ASEAN member states, informality makes it easier to agree not to raise confrontational or contentious issues. In terms of process, an informal setting favors dialogues, meetings, and consultations to see beyond those animosities and suspicions and articulate and commit themselves to a shared vision and common aspirations. In terms of outcome, informality favors general principles and codes of conduct. The 1971 creation of a Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutral (ZOPFAN) Declaration and the 1976 adoption of the Declaration of ASEAN

Concord and the inception of TAC have represented this endeavour. In other words, ASEAN has not relied upon formal dispute-resolution mechanisms and is not a collective arrangement. Instead, the association has been unsparing in its efforts to stress collective strength, solidarity, and exclusive reliance on peaceful processes in the settlement of intraregional differences through means of consultation, accommodation, reciprocity, and informal diplomacy in ASEAN meetings, which involve heads of states, foreign ministers, and other ministers, senior officials, delegates in a wide range of issue areas. For other ASEAN-driven conferences and forums, low institutionalization also characterizes their activities. The ASEAN PMC and the ARF, for example, despite involving regional major powers and external great powers, have been no more than consultative mechanisms that attempt to promote transparency, confidence-building measures on security matters, especially on non-traditional security threats, rather than sensitive and contentious conflict resolution. Equally important, conflicts are managed by the TAC principles, particularly respect for sovereignty, renunciation of the threat or force, and peaceful settlement of dispute, while avoidance of conflict issue on agenda table is generally perceived by ASEAN member states as the formula for ASEAN peace and lead to them to close cooperation.

In this connection, neo-liberal and domestic factor approaches have plausible reasons to claim the weaknesses of ASEAN's informality, especially its low institutionalization and revealing backlashes for member states to gain national bargaining position, respectively. However, by not forcing its incredibly diverse and mutually suspicious members into legally binding standards, ASEAN has done the remarkable job of moving its members from animosity to the close cooperative relationship, a relationship in which violent conflict is all but unthinkable. Informality has contributed to minimizing the impediments to cooperation, creating common understanding for internal solidarity, and galvanizing broad support for regional projects. This has in fact been demonstrated in the spirit of building an ASEAN "unity in diversity" identity.

### **Flexible Consensus**

According to Timo Kivimaki (2011), consensus-based decision-making, which requires maximization efforts to save face for everyone involved, characterizes ASEAN's diplomatic approach. This can be done in lengthy negotiations and quiet, non-legalistic, personal confidence-building aimed at gradual don-playing and prevention of disputes by means that can be accepted unanimously, using the principle of the lowest common denominator (Kivimaki, 2011, p. 67). ASEAN security cooperation is characterized by the concept and practice of consensus. This consensus building is important to ensure the "comfort level" as an important precondition for success in multilateral consultations and negotiations because it does not require 100% agreement by all parties. Rather, it represents a commitment to finding a way of moving forward by establishing what seems to have broad support. Even in situations where ASEAN members find it impossible to arrive at a common position, they nonetheless speak and act as though a certain level of unity has been achieved on that particular issue. Thus, it guarantees voice of every member and saves face of the non-supporting party. Over the past 40 years since its inception, ASEAN adheres to this approach in decision-making process as its member states could spur willingness to sustain differences while crafting some common understanding to facilitate cooperation guided by a shared commitment to moderation and accommodation. As a former Indonesian Foreign Minister, Subiandro put it, "Negotiations in the *musjawarah* and *mufakat* way take place not as between opponents but as between friends and brothers" (Jorgensen-Dahl, 1982, p. 166).

Neo-realists' contention on this point is plausible in a sense that ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making may be driven by the need to portray a common external front aimed at strengthening ASEAN's

position *vis-à-vis* major powers. However, beyond that, sensitive handling of differences among ASEAN member states is a hallmark of the ASEAN Way, leading them to a shared vision and has proven useful in fostering regional economic and political cooperation in Southeast Asia. For example, the concept was applied to addressing the problem of hesitancy and indifference among ASEAN members toward intra-ASEAN economic cooperation, including ASEAN industrial joint ventures and tariff reductions. Without doubt, consensual decision-making now also characterizes the activities of the ARF and, to a lesser extent, the APEC.

### **Open Regionalism and Cooperative Security**

Openness and inclusiveness in the design of regional frameworks and arrangements in both economic and security areas are the third core characteristics of ASEAN. It combines principles of multilateralism, with some of the relatively distinct modes of socialization prevailing in the region, as discussed in the previous section. It should be noted that “inclusiveness” has not been a feature of all international institutions. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), for example, applies the principle of non-discrimination only to the relationship among its members, not to the one between the NATO members and those of the Warsaw Pact. ASEAN's extension of this approach to both economic and security domains reflects the characteristics of ASEAN as not like an exclusively economic bloc or a military alliance as the NATO. The ARF driven by ASEAN involves 27 countries, including non-East Asian major and great powers. ASEAN also hosts the ASEAN Defense Minister's Meeting Plus (ADMMP) which also involves external actors. Besides the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) process, ASEAN drives the EAS which presently involves, though some are geographically contested, three Northeast Asian countries of China, Japan, South Korea, and India, Australia, New Zealand, and most recently, US and Russia, as the memberships. In the ARF, ASEAN has been in pursuit of preferences for informality and the related avoidance of excessive institutionalization, while stressing commitment to transparency and non-discrimination, confidence-building measures, consultation and consensus-building and peaceful settlement of dispute, and so on. Though critics has revolved around the ARF driven by the ASEAN Way, this common, not collective, security arena has been as an effective consultative mechanism for both regional and external players to strengthen security cooperation with a view to ensuring regional peace and stability as a whole, rather than building a collective defense or security. The absence of military pacts in ASEAN has demonstrated this endeavor. Economically, the openness and inclusiveness have helped ASEAN countries move toward closer cohesion and economic integration. The ASEAN Way, especially characterized by informality and flexible consensus, has facilitated cooperation guided by a shared commitment to moderation and accommodation of the member states. This has in turn given impetus to the member states' emphasis on priorities of economic development. In addition, ASEAN has developed an elaborate set of extra-regional agreements, ranging from general statements about the desirability of closer economic relations to what on paper appears to be firm commitments to economic integration through the APT and the EAS.

### **The Marginalization of the ASEAN Way**

The above discussion reveals the fact that the ASEAN principles and norms have created an increasingly connected web of cooperation, but mattered little to obligations *per se*. Under this consideration, the more rule-based institution has been pursued in light of the 2008-adopted ASEAN Charter to comply with all obligations of the membership. The ASEAN leaders' codification of norms and rules could be viewed as a crucial step in its political and institutional development. This new departure was driven by several factors.

First, as a natural procession toward the next level of ASEAN evolution, it is vitally necessary for ASEAN to develop its institutional building with a view to enhancing political cohesion and strengthening integrative efforts of the member states. Second, this new move has been well suited to ASEAN's regional emerging vehicle of East Asian regionalism in which the association has sought measures to assert its consistent centrality in a changing regional architecture. Third, toward the realization of the ASEAN Community by 2015, it is an urgent need to move toward institutional strengthening to speed up the member states' commitment implementation, which had been the major barrier to ASEAN as a relevant international organization. In economic domain, the ASEAN Charter states the adherence to ASEAN's economic rules-based regimes. To be more specific, the economic related principle in the "Principles" states: "Adherence to multilateral trade rules and ASEAN's rules-based regimes for effective implementation of economic commitments and progressive reduction toward elimination of all barriers to regional economic integration, in a market-driven economy"<sup>4</sup>. Going well with the realization of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) is the Declaration on the AEC Blueprint for the implementation by 2015, which says that "...the EAC Blueprint will transform ASEAN into a single market and production base, a highly competitive economic region, a region of equitable economic development, and a region fully integrated into the global economy"<sup>5</sup>. Besides, the two newly completed key integration instruments—the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement and the ASEAN Comprehensive Investment Agreement, along with the business enhancing initiatives envisaged under them have given rise to a new warming of regional trade and investment relations over the past few years. However, it is generally observed that protectionist tendency still looms large in the member states, except for Singapore and Thailand. This fact has triggered skeptics about the change *per se* beyond rhetoric. Needless to say, the ASEAN Charter reveals the marginalization of the ASEAN Way. This became evident once there is a big gap between the recommendations of the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) and the related content contained in the charter. To be more specific, at least two groundbreaking recommendations by the EPG for economic integration were eschewed. First, the group recommended that member states utilize a majority-vote process when consensus could not be achieved<sup>6</sup>. This instrument would serve as a vehicle through which the member states would develop a deeper regional identity since such a voting mechanism is vitally necessary for the member states to subordinate their national interests to regional common interests toward the sense of community. Second, the group suggested the development of an ASEAN Special Fund to assist and support development efforts of the lesser developed group of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV) so that they could keep pace with the older member states because of the former's lacking resources and infrastructure. This mechanism would not only contribute a great deal to addressing a core deficiency in ASEAN's integrative activities, but would also enhance cooperative relations between the recipient and donor states. Yet, the charter differs little from the existing infrastructure for economic integration. In Article 20, the "Consultation and Consensus" remains the principle of the ASEAN decision-making style as a default rule, while dispute settlement mechanism for economic issue now must be consistent with the 2004 Protocol on Enhanced Dispute Settlement Mechanism (Article 24.3), which, however, is by its own terms a voluntary process. In addition, the charter permits

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<sup>4</sup> ASEAN Secretariat. (2008, January). *The ASEAN Charter*, p. 7. Retrieved from <http://www.aseansec.org/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> ASEAN Secretariat. (2008). *Declaration on the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint*, p. 2. Retrieved from <http://www.aseansec.org/5187-10.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> ASEAN Secretariat. (2006). *Report of the Eminent Group on the ASEAN Charter (EPG Report)*. Retrieved from <http://www.aseansec.org/19247.pdf>.

individual member states to opt-out of economic commitments only when there is an initial consensus to invoke the opt-out arrangement (Article 21.2). In other words, in a subtle manner, the ASEAN Charter changes the EPG's recommendation, which incorporated no consensus requirement, by requiring more discussion. Also, there is absence of an ASEAN Special Fund recommended by the EPG for enhancing the CLMV regional integration. In security domain, though eschewing crucial recommendations by the EPG for human rights and democracy, particularly its advocacy for a single High Council as dispute resolution scheme, the ASEAN Charter now marks a stronger focus on "strengthening democracy... and promoting and protecting human rights..."<sup>7</sup>. In March 2009, ASEAN leaders adopted a blueprint for the realization of the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC). The document indicates the goal of a rules-based security community and promises to establish arbitration as a dispute settlement mechanism<sup>8</sup>. These moves are generally viewed as a remarkable progress in the association's institutional and political development. In effect, however, there are doubts about what will be achieved beyond rhetoric. Needless to say, in Southeast Asia, only Indonesia in the post-Suharto regime is labeled as "free" democracy, while the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore are considered to be partly free and the rest are non-democracies. This implies that the ASEAN founding principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and non-intervention of domestic affairs would be under attack, and thus at operational level, regionalism would not be likely to lead to substantial domestic changes on the ground. This explained why some scholars view the linkage or interaction between security, democracy, and regionalism as "hard choices" in Southeast Asia<sup>9</sup>. Now to safeguard its founding principles, both the ASEAN Charter and the Blueprint have neither a clear structure nor a joint security policy. While they affirm that member states must respect human rights and democratic principles, the documents retain principles of mutual respect for independence and sovereignty, and the founding principle of non-intervention into internal affairs.

In sum, informality, flexible consensus, and open regionalism and cooperative security have created a large connected web of cooperation in East and Southeast Asia in the post-Cold War era, but cooperation has not been in line with tight obligations. Although the codification of the ASEAN's norms and rules is a crucial step in the bloc's political and institutional developments, the marginalization of the ASEAN Way might cause lack of strong political will and commitment which are viewed as prerequisites to incorporate the structural changes needed to achieve common interests and goals.

## Conclusions

Theoretical interpretation of the role and potential of ASEAN remains controversial. Neo-realist approach has its partial explanatory power for ASEAN somehow during the Cold War era, but in the aftermath of the Cold War, this approach fails to explain the dynamics of regional security management driven by ASEAN, whose norms are receptive of region-wide security arrangements and have resulted in peaceful changes. In addition, it fails to provide a crucial account for the openness and inclusiveness of ASEAN characteristics through institutional and socialization dimensions. Neo-liberal advocates provide a plausible explanation when examining transnational integration of corporations that have assisted in creating trans-border networks and

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<sup>7</sup> *The ASEAN Charter*, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> ASEAN Secretariat. (2009). *ASEAN Politico-Security Community Blueprint*, p. 12. Retrieved from <http://www.aseansec.org/18741.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> See more detail in book review of Alfred Gerstl (2009). Emmerson, Donald K. (Ed.) (2008). *Hard choices: security, democracy, and regionalism in Southeast Asia*. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 2(1), 105-112. Retrieved from [http://www.seas.at/aseas/2\\_1/ASEAS\\_2\\_1\\_A7.pdf](http://www.seas.at/aseas/2_1/ASEAS_2_1_A7.pdf).

more or less regional dependence on the external economies. In addition, it is plausible to claim ASEAN's low institutionalized frameworks and mechanisms to bring about commitment *per se*. However, neo-liberalism fails to explain the recent evolution of intraregional web of regional connectedness of economic interdependence. It also fails to interpret ASEAN's pursuit of its position in the middle path between great powers or balancing strategy while pursuing sovereignty insurance and sustaining the informality and flexible consensus for closer regional cooperation, which has proven useful in economic and security cooperation in the Southeast Asian regional peace, stability, and prosperity. Domestic factors reflect a rational choice in accommodation of domestic institutions, policy, and behavior for bargaining national interest position in response to profound impact of regionalism, whereas they fail to have reached consensus *per se* in the past decade so as to strengthen commitment and policy implementation. In terms of process, it is effective to gain intra-ASEAN broad support in decision-making process, but the outcome remains problematic because of complexities of state behavior and impediments unleashed by domestic state-society relations. Constructivists have the strongest explanatory power for the ASEAN Way-driven patterns of ASEAN security, economic spheres, as well as the significance of its norms toward the evolution of regionalism, on the one hand, and relatively distinct modes of socialization prevailing in the region as the result of regionalization, on the other. In a nutshell, in the process of regionalization and to a lesser extent regionalism, the ASEAN Way and norms are emerging as the determinant not only in Southeast Asia, but they have also exerted profound impacts on all East Asian regional frameworks, forums, and arrangements. These developments are, and will be, potentially constructing a collective identity in the region, which is quite distinctive from the patterns of regionalism and regionalization in Western Europe. For this reason, theoretically speaking, constructivism should be viewed as the predominant, if not most plausible, approach to interpret the role and potential of ASEAN.

### Recommendations

In the way ahead, much needs to be done to enhance strong political will and commitment of the regional states in East and Southeast Asian regionalism. ASEAN ought to, first and foremost, consider the promotion of the inner strength of the community to be the immediate objective, while building an East Asian Community is a gradual and long-term process; second, further enhance institutional capacity building and reforms, as well as accountability to bring about political cohesion and commitment *per se*, particularly in economic sphere, to strengthen integrative efforts, as well as to foster regional economic linkage and complementarities; third, further codify the ASEAN Way through which a stronger political will must be ensured, such as taking common positions on issues that have vital impacts on the region, particularly the codification of the principle of "non-intervention" to stimulate the regional states' constructive role and engagement; fourth, ensure a constructive cooperation between China and Japan for the common interests of East Asian integration; fifth, maintain its continued strategy of balance of influence between China and Japan, and between the United States and China in both politico-security and economic spheres, while ensuring their continued support for ASEAN's centrality in the APT process and in the EAS toward the long-term goal of the East Asian Community building.

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