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**The ASEAN Community Beyond 2015**

**Carolina G Hernandez**

THE APR SERIES  
E-Monograph



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## The ASEAN Community Beyond 2015<sup>1</sup>

### What is a community?

At its very least, whenever the word ‘community’ is mentioned, the first thing that most of us would think of is a group of people banded together for some common purpose. That a community is about people must be the underlying idea behind many official statements made by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that the ASEAN Community — of which its leaders and other elites hope to realise on 31 December 2015<sup>2</sup> — needs to be a people-oriented, if not yet a people-centred, community. It is also behind a recent argument made elsewhere that a community is about people, and that ASEAN ought to put the peoples of Southeast Asia at the centre of building that community.<sup>3</sup> In short, without the peoples of Southeast Asia getting involved in and becoming part of this community-building process, the ASEAN Community envisioned by its political leaders and articulated in various official ASEAN documents, such as the 2003 Bali Concord II and the 2009 Roadmap for an ASEAN Community 2009–2015, will remain political and economic-elite oriented.

### The ASEAN Community and its pillars

That the process behind the vision of an ASEAN Community began a few years ago is generally recognised. Its beginning is usually traced to the

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<sup>1</sup> Remarks prepared for Session 3 – ASEAN Beyond 2015: What does it mean to be a community?, 29<sup>th</sup> Asia-Pacific Roundtable hosted by ISIS Malaysia and ASEAN-ISIS, Kuala Lumpur, 1–3 June 2015.

<sup>2</sup> This is the timetable agreed on by ASEAN member states even as they also agree that community-building will remain work-in-progress beyond 2015. The second pillar of the ASEAN Community — the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) — is expected to be realised by the end of 2015.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Carolina G Hernandez and Motoko Shuto, “ASEAN-Japan Strategic Partnership in Southeast Asia: The socio-cultural pillar”, in Rizal Sukma and Yoshihide Soeya (eds) *Beyond 2015: ASEAN-Japan Strategic Partnership for Democracy, Peace, and Prosperity in Southeast Asia* (Tokyo and New York: Japan Center for International Exchange, 2014), p. 58.

ASEAN Vision 2020 forged in Kuala Lumpur following the Asian financial crisis of 1997. That vision is about realising an ASEAN that is a concert of Southeast Asian nations (governed by the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation or TAC, the Declaration of ASEAN as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality or ZOPFAN, and the Bangkok Treaty declaring ASEAN as a Nuclear-Weapons Free Zone or SEANWFZ, among others), a partnership in dynamic development, a community of caring societies, and an ASEAN that is open to the world. Subsequent development of this seminal idea is found in the Bali Concord II, which declared the establishment of an ASEAN Community “comprising three pillars, namely, political and security cooperation, economic cooperation, and socio-cultural cooperation that are closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing for the purpose of ensuring durable peace, stability and shared prosperity in the region.”<sup>4</sup> The document further elaborated these three pillars thus: “(a) the ASEAN Security Community [is] to ensure that countries in the region live at peace with one another and with the world in a just, democratic and harmonious environment; (b) the ASEAN Economic Community [is] to create a stable, prosperous and highly competitive economic region in which there is a free flow of goods, services, investment, capital, and greater mobility of professionals, talents and skilled labour; and (c) the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community [is] to promote a community of caring societies and foster regional identity.”<sup>5</sup>

It would take a few more years for ASEAN to develop blueprints that would constitute the *Roadmap for an ASEAN Community 2009–2015*, adopted in Cha-am, Thailand, on 1 March 2009. This roadmap provides key ideas on how the ASEAN Community’s three pillars are to be realised through various cooperative activities and institutions among the ten ASEAN member states and their Dialogue Partners as appropriate.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The Declaration of ASEAN Concord II, Bali, Indonesia, 7 October 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> See the *Roadmap for an ASEAN Community 2009–2015*.

The political-security pillar is now known as the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) and is described as consisting of three main elements based on the principles of political development (in democracy, rule of law, human rights, among other values), ASEAN centrality in its relations with its Dialogue Partners and the regional security architecture of Southeast Asia, and an understanding of security as comprehensive. These elements are a rules-based community of shared values and norms, a cohesive, peaceful, stable and resilient region with shared responsibility for comprehensive security, and a dynamic and outward-looking region in an increasingly integrated and interdependent world.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) represents 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>8</sup>

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) for its part has over 300 action lines to ensure that its six characteristics are realised. These are human development, social welfare and protection, social justice and rights, ensuring environmental sustainability, building the ASEAN identity, and narrowing the development gap.<sup>9</sup>

A closer examination of these three pillars and their blueprints shows that only the third pillar's blueprint clearly commits to the vision of an ASEAN Community that is people-centred. It hopes to realise such a community through various activities in the six characteristic elements of the ASCC that are also people-centered and environmentally friendly with the goal of achieving sustainable development for the peoples of Southeast Asia.

Another important observation in regard to the blueprints is that the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 5–19.

<sup>8</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 21–66 for the AEC Blueprint. This is the most elaborate of the three blueprints.

<sup>9</sup> The ASCC Blueprint is in *ibid.*, pp. 67–92.

areas of cooperative activities in the ASCC are truly intrusive of national sovereignty as they address matters of domestic concern, such as social justice, human and social development in various spheres including in education, health, religion, and others. And while the ASCC Blueprint also includes human rights, the issue of whether it belongs to the domestic or international domain remains contested in ASEAN official circles — this was perhaps one reason why the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) began with and continues to focus on a promotion, rather than a protection mandate.

It is my firm conviction that if the enhanced political-security cooperation among the member states of ASEAN and the economic benefits of becoming a single market and production base sought by the economic pillar are not shared among the peoples of ASEAN, then the ASEAN Community we are seeking to realise in 2015 or beyond will truly be beyond ASEAN's reach. The ordinary peoples of ASEAN in the villages and even in urban centres, whose support and participation in the community-building process is crucial, cannot become genuine stakeholders if they remain untouched by the benefits promised in the APSC and the AEC. Unfortunately, despite the rhetoric and the fact that only through the ASEAN peoples' buying-in in the community-building process can an ASEAN community (of and with people in it) be realised, the ASCC remains an after-thought, an added-on.

In this regard, ASEAN leaders must understand and accept the fact that things at home and abroad are in constant flux. Consequently, there is a need to calibrate processes, mechanisms and institutions to ensure they continue to work in a much-changed environment. What worked in the formative years of ASEAN is likely to no longer work at present due to an ever-changing set of conditions in our world that impacts on the way we work, play and live.

A step in the right direction, it seems to me, occurred in Kuala Lumpur some months ago. Amidst earlier documents articulating the official



ASEAN view of the three-pillared ASEAN Community, the declaration by the ASEAN member states through their leaders, made during Malaysia's chairmanship, is truly laudable. It merits the support of the peoples of Southeast Asia if only for its commitment to build a people-oriented, people-centred ASEAN Community.<sup>10</sup>

## The way forward

In this regard, ASEAN needs to undertake a serious soul-searching that should include the following:

1. A recognition that 1967 is not the same as 2015 — what has worked then may not work in the same way now. Among many earthshaking changes include those brought about by the technological revolution, especially in information and communication, which shortened distances and in many important ways helped create a 'borderless world'.<sup>11</sup>
2. Consider a more objective and hard set of criteria to determine performance or accomplishment of the blueprints or other cooperative activities of ASEAN, especially for community-building purposes. The attitude of 'business as usual' that has characterised ASEAN regardless of changing times must come to an end.
3. The flexibility that afforded ASEAN enormous advantages in the past is gone since the 'ASEAN Way' — a euphemism that includes decision-making practices, principles of interstate behaviour including non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries, among others — had been institutionalised in the ASEAN Charter. To change

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<sup>10</sup> See the 26<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit's Kuala Lumpur Declaration on a People-Oriented, People-Centred ASEAN, 27 April 2015.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Kenichi Ohmae, *The Borderless World: Power and Strategy in the Interlinked Economy* (New York: Harper Business, 1990), especially pp. 217–238.

an approach to a burning issue would now require an amendment of the Charter, a process that is bound to be tedious, time-consuming, and highly contentious, if such an amendment is at all feasible, especially as the legendary ASEAN solidarity and ASEAN centrality appear to be challenged by the South China Sea issue.<sup>12</sup>

4. Nonetheless, it is time perhaps to consider amending the constraining elements of the ASEAN Charter — such as equal annual contribution to its operations and consensus decision-making — by agreeing, for example, that annual contribution to ASEAN should recognise the member states’ development gap in ASEAN<sup>13</sup> and adopt a differentiated scheme of contribution based, for example, on the gross national product (GNP) per capita, purchasing power parity (PPP), or gross domestic product (GDP) and that consensus should not be defined as unanimity. In the latter case, might it be feasible to adopt the flexible formula of ASEAN minus X that is already in use within ASEAN? Moreover, the United Nations with a near-universal membership of nearly 200 member states confers the veto to only five of its members: China, France, Great Britain (or the United Kingdom), Russia, and the United States. Put another way, ASEAN has always officially distanced itself from being likened to Western institutions, including the European Union (EU). Yet it adopts the EU’s practice of consensus as unanimity in the EU Military Committee.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Carolina G Hernandez, “The South China Sea Issue: A litmus test for ASEAN centrality?”, paper presented at the Regional Conference on ASEAN and the South China Sea: Achievements, Challenges, and Future Directions, Cambodian Institute of Cooperation and Peace, Phnom Penh, 19–20 September 2013.

<sup>13</sup> After all, this ‘development gap’ is constantly being emphasised as an important focus of integration and community-building by ASEAN officials and found in its community-building documents, including the Blueprints for the AEC and ASCC.

<sup>14</sup> As explained in the Distinguished Luncheon Address on “The European Union’s Security Architecture and Its Role to Strengthen Peace and Security”, delivered by General Patrick de Rousiers, Chairman of the European Union Military Committee, 29<sup>th</sup> Asia-Pacific Roundtable, 2 June 2015.

5. Put some political will behind the ASCC to ensure it does not remain an after-thought, especially in the light of the 2015 Kuala Lumpur Declaration on a People-Oriented, People-Centred ASEAN. It is necessary to recognise that an elite-centric ASEAN may no longer work in this highly technologically-interconnected world in which we all live. As the late James Rosenau argued, there are just far too many developments challenging international politics today, including the empowerment of people whose obedience to the state can no longer be taken for granted.<sup>15</sup>
  
6. Ensure that collective interest is regarded as above national interest as a way of responding to the constraints placed on collective effectiveness by the Westphalian system of bordered sovereign states. Indeed, one of the most important challenges in this international system of sovereign and independent nation states is how to effect a change in mindsets among those who make decisions within each nation state, such that they look at their national interests as including regional and global good and well-being. An outstanding challenge in building the ASEAN Community — how to build the ASEAN identity sought by the ASCC — is in an ASEAN where national interests remain sacrosanct and do not include a recognition that only by putting regional interest as symbolised by ASEAN as part of each member’s core national interest can the collective interests of the 10 member states be secured. In fact, without this change in mindset, the much-vaunted regional imperative to maintain ‘ASEAN centrality’ is likely to slip away.

## Concluding Remarks

Surely the community-building process will remain work-in-progress for many more years to come. Hastening the process in my view cannot be

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<sup>15</sup> James Rosenau, *Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990).

done without speaking to and involving the peoples of Southeast Asia. They must no longer be treated as mere objects, but as subjects that have a critical role to play in building the ASEAN Community beyond 2015.

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