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Rethinking the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in the Post-Cold War Era

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ZOPFAN does not have an image problem. It has two image problems. First, many well-informed people have either not heard of the Zone of Peace Freedom of Neutrality, or did so some time ago and have since forgotten about it. Second, there is a smaller group of people who are aware of ZOPFAN but who tend to discount its significance and impact. They are often skeptical and cynical about ZOPFAN and regard it as little more than empty symbolism.

But there are also those who think ZOPFAN is worthy of closer and more serious consideration, and quite a few of these people are concentrated in regional gatherings such as the Asia-Pacific Roundtable. Rather to my surprise, I would like to side with this minority view. I don't think it is wise to claim that the 1971 Kuala Lumpur Declaration is the key to the development of an Asian security community, and I think that community is some way off. But ZOPFAN is part of the fabric of norms which press for restraint on divisive behavior in the region – by the Southeast Asian countries and external powers alike. The Declaration represents a compromise between the differing positions which were being adopted by some of the members of ASEAN, who as a much smaller and younger grouping than we see today, were still feeling their way. Without such compromises, these different positions might otherwise have proven more divisive.

That said, it would be ambitious to conclude that the Southeast Asian countries and the great powers have fully or continuously reflected the spirit of what is actually a rather undemanding Declaration in the forty years since its signature here in Kuala Lumpur. But there is still something about the ZOPFAN experience which encourages us to ask some fairly important questions about regional relationships in 2011 and beyond.

ZOPFAN and the Great Powers

The establishment and the experience of ZOPFAN speaks to an issue which is very pertinent to today's observers of regional affairs: Southeast Asia's relations with the great powers. The ZOPFAN Declaration emerged during a period when the great power balance in wider Asia was shifting. Concerns were arising that competition in Asia between the great powers could reduce the capacity of the ASEAN countries, some of whom had been independent sovereign states for a relatively brief period, to pursue their interests in important processes of national political, social and economic development.

A multitude of interacting adjustments were part of this changing external picture: the disappearance of Britain as a significant factor in regional power politics, the reduction in America's commitment to ground wars in Asia in light of its difficult experience in Vietnam, the increasing strength of both the Soviet Union and China, and concerns about coming influence of Vietnam, the largest Southeast Asian power outside of ASEAN at that time.

Relations between the great powers themselves were in a genuine state of flux. This was an era of significant tension between the Soviet Union and China. The two fought a seven month border war in 1969 and were not united in their attitudes towards the conflict which was still occurring in mainland Southeast Asia. This was also an era of superpower détente, but the improvement in US-Soviet relations had more benefit for Europe than it did for Asia. While this was also the era of the grand rapprochement between the United States and China, that improvement in great power relations could have unintended consequences for some Southeast Asian capitals. Would this Sino-American understanding mean greater influence in this part of the world for China, known for supporting insurgencies in the region and subjecting itself to the Cultural Revolution?

Three Options

In these challenging, fluid and uncertain external circumstances, there were at least three options open to ASEAN's policy-makers. The first was to acknowledge that while the great powers did indeed play a part in the affairs of the region, assurances needed to be sought from them that they would not use Southeast Asia as their plaything by playing the game of divide a rule. This meant not acting in such ways as to encourage the Southeast Asian countries to take sides. Here the Southeast Asian nations would themselves need to investigate their own strategic relations with any one of the great powers to ensure that they were not sustaining the competitive juices of the other big players.

Into this first category we might put Malaysia's thinking about neutralization in the late 1960s including the proposal which was submitted to the Lusaka meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1970. This was a call for a *real* and *robust* zone where the great powers would in a sense neutralize themselves. While on the surface this would seem to be an even-handed gesture, treating the great powers equally, proposals of this sort tend to redound to the different interests of the great powers in an uneven way. Great power neutralization would probably have done more to restrain the two superpowers, and the intrusion of their East-West competition, and it would especially have reduced the role of the United States, the more active of these two in developing strategic relationships across Southeast Asia. It would and have done rather less to curtail China, the up and coming power. Indeed some scholars have argued that for Malaysia, which was experiencing some challenging inter-communal circumstances domestically, the proposal for neutralization might have been aimed partly as a means of developing an understanding with China.

The second option also acknowledges that the attitudes taken by the great powers are crucial to Southeast Asia's security. But rather than seeking from

them an assurance of fair play which restricts their competitive power-plays in the region, one seeks to encourage an equilibrium of power between them as the multiple big players, so that the power of each one balances the influence of the others. This vigilantly watched and continually adjusting equilibrium might perhaps buy the ASEAN countries (and other smaller powers in the region) some valuable time, and allow them to avoid the nasty choices between rival big powers.

This is familiar in the thinking we have come to see from Singapore in particular, but it has also some currency in today's thinking in Indonesia, Vietnam and elsewhere. Back in the early 1970s this logic would have appealed to those who felt that it was in the interests of the Southeast Asian region for significant connections to be retained with the United States including the formal alliance with Washington that were maintained by two members of the original ASEAN five.

That US connection suggests that such an equilibrium would not necessarily affect the interests and roles of the great powers evenly. Whereas proposals for neutralization can favour the rising power, those with an equilibrium in mind tend to privilege the established ones.

But there are still various interpretations of what an Asian equilibrium might involve and why one might be necessary. In this same period the Australian scholar Hedley Bull was touting the idea of a four-way great power equilibrium in Asia. Sensing a major change in the regional distribution of power which featured a chastened United States and a more prominent China, Bull argued that Australia's security could no longer depend so strongly as it had done on the US alliance. Instead it needed to rest upon a four way equilibrium between the United States, the Soviet Union, China and Japan. This meant, for example, that Australia should welcome the Soviet Union's regional role as a way of balancing China's, although Bull was also quick to point out that China also had a legitimate place at Asia's great power table, even if it was going through tumultuous times. And while he foresaw a diminished role for the United States in the region, (a forecast that has been made rather too often) he did not suggest that American would disappear as a major factor. It was now, however, one of many.

The third and potentially most radical option is the refusal to accept that Southeast Asia's security should depend on the great powers, either by getting them to restrain their own behaviour or each other's behaviour through an equilibrium. This is the argument that the region would be better without the great powers, and that Southeast Asia should be left to produce its own security. This thinking appealed to Jakarta and helped propel Indonesia's opposition to the original Malaysian proposal which preceded the 1971 Kuala Lumpur compromise.

In its purest form of this self-sufficient logic would have required many of non-aligned Indonesia's more aligned neighbours in Southeast Asia to jettison their strategic relationships with outside powers. It would probably have required the Philippines and Thailand to end their alliance relationships with the United

States which were by then nearly three decades old. It would have meant the dissolution of the South East Asia Treaty Organization a few years before its eventual demise in the mid-1970s upon the reunification of Vietnam. It would probably have argued against the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA). Also emerging in 1971, the FPDA were welcomed by their two Southeast Asian signatories, Malaysia and Singapore, who stood to gain as beneficiaries of their relations with the three external members, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. But while a good deal softer than Britain's earlier alliance commitments in Southeast Asia, the FPDA was still not warmly welcomed by Indonesia.

This third approach, which might be called strategic autarky, would also have had an uneven result on the great power picture. It would have further reduced the already declining Western influence in Southeast Asia: Britain and the United States were the main external security partners for a number of the ASEAN countries, and indeed among the five only Indonesia lacked such a connection. Presumably the Soviet Union would have also been required to cease its assistance to Vietnam, but the latter was not yet a member of ASEAN, nor was it a signatory to its declarations. Removing the great power linkage and presence might also have changed the delicate balance of power within ASEAN, with Malaysia and Singapore given extra reasons to be conscious of Indonesia's size and also to be concerned about each other's intentions. Indeed one of the main benefits of the FPDA has been to encourage Singapore and Malaysia to maintain a relationship of peaceful co-existence.

The ZOPFAN Compromise

The ZOPFAN Declaration reflects the tradition of ASEAN decision-making where compromises emerge from the different interests that its members bring to the table. Critics may deride the lowest common denominator approach this can produce, and the 1971 ZOPFAN Declaration is an example of this tradition, but such pragmatic standards of behaviour have helped keep ASEAN afloat. They are not without their wisdom and in many instances have served the region well.

Accordingly the Kuala Lumpur Declaration does not demand immediate neutralization. The 'n' word does not appear in the two brief operative clauses which conclude the Declaration. Instead the preamble which indicates that 'the neutralization of South East Asia is a desirable objective and that we should explore ways and means of bringing about its realization.' The language in the operative clauses is more closely linked to the spirit of ASEAN's 1967 foundation document, committing the five signatories to work to be 'free from any form or manner of interference by outside Powers.'

Rather than a concerted attempt at neutralization per se, there is a more general (and some might say vaguer) recognition of the interests of ASEAN's members in conducting their affairs in a space which is less aggravated and crowded by great power competition. The emphasis on freedom from interference is reminiscent of earlier concerns with the possibility of external support for local insurgencies, a challenge which helped shape the original aims of ASEAN. But the Declaration

makes no mention at all of external powers. The conspicuous silence on this vital point suggests that while Malaysia's plans for gaining assurances of restraint from the great powers had not been satisfied, neither had Indonesia's interests in the ending of security partnerships by its ASEAN neighbours with great power protectors.

Taking a Deeper Look

The ability that ASEAN countries have since had to maintain alliance and near-alliance relations with great power friends, may explain some of the skepticism directed towards the Declaration. But this attitude may be out of keeping with what the Declaration says, setting expectations higher than what was agreed in Kuala Lumpur forty years ago. And ZOPFAN emphasizes the other part of the story: the building by the ASEAN countries of their own cooperative relationships. One of the Declaration's operative clauses commits the ASEAN signatories to "make concerted efforts to broaden the areas of cooperation which would contribute to their strength, solidarity and closer relationship." This is not about finding security through the perfection of great power conduct. It is about building up ASEAN's own capacity to develop order in Southeast Asia. This gives some strength to Indonesia's position on what now might be called ASEAN centrality.

Some of the Declaration's other features also foreshadow ASEAN initiatives which were to come in later years. The preamble notes with approval the establishment of nuclear weapon free zones in other parts of the world, something which would later come to this region in the form of the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapons Free Zone. The Declaration also notes the importance of the peaceful resolution of disputes as a clear expectation of interstate behaviour endorsed by the United Nations. This theme is also reflected in the subsequent Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC).

Indeed ZOPFAN was overtaken and hidden by the TAC and other later products of Southeast Asian diplomacy, one reason perhaps for its low profile. But it is still part of the fabric of ASEAN's normative endeavours. This is so even if the idea of a zone of peace freedom and neutrality is not entirely in keeping with the type of geopolitical reasoning that was entertained in a number of ASEAN capitals when Vietnam invaded Cambodia in the mid-1970s and which led some of them to view China as a regional balancer.

This normative fabric still has its limits today in light of the realities of modern diplomacy in Southeast Asian. These limits come into play when we consider whether ZOPFAN and subsequent declarations and initiatives really underwrite aspirations within ASEAN for the establishment of a security community. To achieve this lofty objective one would need to confirm that the use of armed violence had become unthinkable as a way of settling disputes within that community, as had preparations to do so including the competition in armaments. Such a security community is still a glint in the eye in this part of the world and efforts to suggest otherwise may encourage further cynicism. The recent, albeit, limited scuffle between Thailand and Cambodia is but one piece of

data which call into question that probability. And while a number of the Southeast Asian claimants in the South China Sea have reasons to be concerned about China's approach in recent times, wouldn't a security community mean that they would need to guarantee that in their relations with one another as fellow members of ASEAN they could guarantee peaceful behaviour?

The Rise of the Second Option: Equilibrium

In 2011, few ASEAN countries, and few of their regional partners, including Australia and New Zealand, are taking active steps to build a zone of neutrality. None of them, from what I can see, are seeking to unwind their existing connections to outside powers. While there is an interest in peace and freedom, there is little appetite for the idea that the great powers can somehow be kept out of Southeast Asia's affairs. If anything there is a desire to strengthen their involvement. This is happening in at least three ways.

First, Southeast Asia is home to a number of thriving economies which would be wasting away were it not for their trade and investment connections with the major Asia-Pacific powers. At the forefront here are a series of increasingly intense economic relations with China, which certainly did not exist in 1971 when the ZOPFAN Declaration was signed (years before Deng declared that it was good to be rich). Depending as they do upon China's continuing growth for a good deal of their own prosperity, the Southeast Asian countries would be unable to countenance any move towards disengagement with China, at least economically. That so many of the members of ASEAN also enjoy beneficial economic interactions with the United States and Japan, and increasingly with India, also strikes a blow to the idea of keeping the great powers out of the picture (the main restraint that might be sought from them is the avoidance of trade barriers rather than any commitment to neutralization).

For New Zealand and Australia the picture is very similar: our economic future depends heavily on the success of our engagement with the great Asia-Pacific economies. While Australia's reliance on its East Asian economic connections is stronger than New Zealand's, Australia's resources boom has helped drive transTasman trade which keeps New Zealand's economy ticking over.

Second, many Southeast Asian countries, both alone and together, have an interest in a balance of military power between the major players who they realize are not going to be going away in security terms. In fact as Asia's economic giants increase their ability to project military power and exert their interests in maritime Southeast Asia - the gateway between the Indian and Pacific Oceans - the prospects of keeping the region free from great power strategic activity and competition are receding rather than increasing. Rather than keeping the great powers out, keeping them in together to balance each other's power seems to be an increasingly common approach.

With Japan less confident than its substantial economic base and military potential would suggest, and India still coming onto the scene, this often boils down to the management of the China-US strategic balance. And the long-term

trend in relative power appears to be in China's favour. As China slowly closes the gap with the US, we should not expect that amongst many Southeast Asian countries the appeal of an American strategic connection with the region, formal or informal, will disappear.

That appeal could get stronger. Supposedly outdated alliance relationships with Washington are still valued, (and increasingly so by the Philippines). The port facilities offered by Singapore also encourage a continuing American presence in the region. The FPDA is valued partly because two of its external members, Australia and the United Kingdom, also have such close alliance relationships with Washington. But it is not all about the United States. The closer security relations that some Southeast Asian governments have been building with India, Asia's second rising power, are also part of the quest for a military equilibrium. And so too is the cooperative interaction between a number of Southeast Asian countries and the People's Liberation Army which is also likely to steadily increase.

The pattern in Australia and New Zealand's relationships with the larger powers is not altogether dissimilar. Australia's economic, diplomatic and military interaction with China has increased but not at the expense of a very close strategic relationship with Washington and the signing of security declarations with both Japan and India. New Zealand has a closer security relationship (but not a full alliance) with the United States alongside its very important with China with whom it has a highly valued Free Trade Agreement. The 2010 Defence White Paper included New Zealand's obligations to the FPDA as one of the conditions in which it might consider the use of force.

Third, the simultaneous engagement of the major powers is a cardinal feature of the regional multilateral architecture, much of which is still centred on ASEAN. Some of that architecture has a more exclusively East Asian feel which tends to recognise the obvious importance of China's regional place: ASEAN+3 is the paramount example here. But a number of Southeast Asian governments have also been very keen to see the closer multilateral engagement of the United States including in the expanded East Asia Summit and the Asian Defence Ministers Meeting Plus arrangement. New Zealand and Australia have also given strong support to this development. India's place in this consolidated regional membership of 18 countries (which also include China, Japan, and Russia) is also part of the attempt to build in some extra ballast in a multi-party equilibrium.

These three areas of regional relationships involving the great powers – economic, strategic and diplomatic – all appear to be heading in the same direction. Most of the members of ASEAN, and many of their medium and small power partners (including Australia and New Zealand) are seeking to involve and engage the great powers simultaneously in the hope that some sort of equilibrium between them can create a space in which peace and prosperity flourish. New Zealand's Prime Minister John Key said last year in a major speech that he was comfortable with the prospect of two superpowers in the region – implying that China could join the United States in that rarified status. Like many others New Zealand is seeking to work with the giants simultaneously: the White

Paper welcomes the US presence in the region at the same time as it acknowledges the legitimacy of China's place as a rising power.

Back to the Future?

Many of the features of today's regional environment hark back to the era which brought us the ZOPFAN Declaration in 1971. Great power relations are in a state of significant change as China rises, India does so at a slower pace, and Japan and the United States seek to respond (with Soviet Russia out and India in maybe Bull's quadrilateral equilibrium has something going for it). And there are the concerns about what the great powers may do. On the one hand there is concern that increased great power competition may increasingly find its way into Southeast Asia. On the other there have been concerns about America's relative decline and attempts to encourage its continuing engagement as a regional balancer.

But this time around, partly thanks to the new multilateral mechanisms which have emerged in more recent years, ASEAN is (organizationally at least) at the centre of attempts to build beneficial relationships of engagement with the great powers. In this century, as global power shifts increasingly in Asia's direction, even modest contributions to these relationships can have international significance.

As a modest achievement, ZOPFAN might not quite be at the forefront of these efforts. And there is little enthusiasm for neutralization or non-alignment: that other option, the search for an equilibrium between engaged powers, seems to be king. But one is still encouraged to wonder what a Declaration of the ZOPFAN family might look like if there were attempts to establish it in 2011.

It probably would not be a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality. But there might be room for ZOPFAR: a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Restraint? Why restraint and not neutrality? Might we call on the great powers to consider the mutual benefits that would arise if they restrained their conventional military practices before their competition with one another and their interactions with some of Southeast Asia's countries get too heated? Could we see the South China Sea itself as a Zone of Restraint? Progress on multilateral incidents at sea arrangements would also seem to be in order. But in the meantime a fair bit of unilateral restraint, which is the real core of arms control as Hedley Bull argued all those years ago, would help too. ASEAN and its partners do not want to, nor can we afford to, exclude the great powers. But we do need them to play by a set of good rules. Finding rules that will appeal to all the big powers is part of the challenge.

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