

**REGIONAL SECURITY ORDER IN SOUTHEAST ASIA:
AN INDONESIAN VIEW**

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Introduction

Southeast Asia has often been described as a region in an unending search for a regional security order. Two decades after adjusting to post-Cold War order, members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) once again find themselves in a changing strategic environment. The ongoing strategic transformation taking place in East Asia is once again forcing Southeast Asian states to reassess its position within the evolving regional order in Southeast Asia. While the end of the Cold War gave way to a "unipolar moment" characterised by the United States (US) primacy in the region, developments in the first decade of the 21st century clearly point to the rise of other major powers, notably China and India. As a process of power shift among extra-regional major powers is increasingly becoming a defining feature of international politics in East Asia, ensuring peace and stability in Southeast Asia remains the prevailing concern of ASEAN. In that context, ASEAN also realises that the preservation of its interests, relevance and role will be dependent upon its ability to actively shape the emerging regional order that suits its own security interests, particularly in managing power transition and thus ensuring peace and stability.

This paper seeks to highlight ASEAN's response to the regional strategic change in East Asia challenges facing the grouping in building regional security order. The discussion is divided into three sections. The first section discusses challenges brought about by power transition in East Asia. The second section examines the type of regional order that ASEAN wants to build and the problems confronting ASEAN's efforts in bringing that order into reality. The third section looks at Indonesia's position and response to the question of regional order-building.

**Implications of Power Shift:
Challenges for ASEAN**

For the purpose of this discussion, I will limit my observations about the implications of the ongoing power shift for ASEAN only by looking at three factors. First, The rise of China constitutes the most salient aspect of power shift in East Asia. Over the last two decades, China has consistently demonstrated its ability to sustain economic growth at an impressive rate. As it overtook Japan as the world's second largest economy in 2010, it has become increasingly clear that China would soon achieve its

strategic aspiration of becoming a great power (*daguo*). Along with its economic development, China's military capability has also improved significantly, even though it is still far below the US' capability. As its economic and military power increases, China has now emerged as an influential actor in the region. Indeed, China's rapid rise as an economic power house and military power has reinforced the country's centrality in regional and global politics. China has now become a nation with strong sense of confidence and nationalism. And, as its power rises, it is normal that China would want greater recognition and more respects from others.

Second, even though the US remains the most powerful state in East Asia, its influence in the region has increasingly been limited by the rise of China. It becomes clear that the US feels the necessity to maintain and ensure its political primacy, economic interests, and military preponderance in the region. It has declared a renewed commitment and interest to play a more active role in the Asia-Pacific, especially in East Asia. This new intention has been well reflected in the pivotal strategy towards the Asia-Pacific under the current administration of President Barrack Obama. The drive to strengthen its security and defence relationship with Australia, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, and also with Vietnam, demonstrates the US' commitment to match such policy declaration with actions. The US has also reinforced its military presence in the region. Equally important, the US has also taken some initiatives to deepen its economic role in the region as demonstrated by its decision to push for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

Third, as China's rise becomes inevitable, and the US feels obliged to pursue a re-balancing strategy, it is far from certain how Sino-US relationship is going to evolve in the future. While no one wants to see a strategic rivalry between the two great powers, recent developments suggest that might be the case. The possibility for a Sino-US rivalry is no longer a remote possibility, but an emerging reality. As a rising power with its own interests, China seems to see the US as the only powers that might limit its regional pre-eminence. Meanwhile, the US is clearly opposed to the rise of a new power that might pose a challenge to the country's pre-eminence in the region. At the same time, strategic rivalry between the US and China over maritime access, supremacy and dominance in two strategic oceans --the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea-- is also of a particular concern for Southeast Asian states. Rich in natural resources and crucial for sea lanes of communication, these two oceans are of significant strategic value for fundamental national interests not only of major powers but also the entire region and beyond.

These three strategic developments-- the rise of China, the US' attempt to retain its primacy, and the implications of both for Sino-US relations-- bring about three strategic implications for ASEAN which, in turn, could undermine Southeast Asia's regional autonomy. First, a Sino-US strategic rivalry, especially if it becomes more intense, has the potential to polarise ASEAN. Second, if ASEAN becomes polarised amid the growing rivalry between the US and China, ASEAN's role as "a manager of regional order" would become marginalised. The grouping's room for maneuver would be severely constrained by strategic choices made by the competing extra-regional major powers. Third, as ASEAN become polarised and marginalised, the application of ASEAN's centrality would become more difficult to sustain. Indeed, if this scenario became a reality, ASEAN would find itself in a very difficult position. In this context, ASEAN's greatest nightmare is to be in a position where its member states would have

to abandon regional unity and, in the pursuit of national security, would be forced to take side in the emerging Sino-US rivalry.

Regional Security Order: What Does ASEAN Want and Do?

Whether or not ASEAN will be able to withstand the three challenges mentioned above will to a considerable degree depend on the type of regional security order in the region. While analysts and scholars differ regarding the extent of ASEAN's role and influence over regional security order-building, it is safe to say that ASEAN does agree that any regional order needs to serve at least five main strategic objectives:

- a) to preserve ASEAN's centrality (Southeast Asia's autonomy)
- b) to accommodate major powers
- c) to prevent *both* strategic rivalry among major powers and concert of powers among them,
- d) to ensure ASEAN's unimpeded access to material benefits (defence, trade, investment, financial coops, market access, and so on)
- e) to facilitate regional integration (ASEAN Community-building)

Indeed, since the beginning of the 21st century, starting with the agreement in October 2003 to transform itself into an ASEAN Community, ASEAN has been actively participating in regional order-building process. However, ASEAN's efforts at that time were seen by many, both within and outside the region, as inadequate. ASEAN's capacity and credibility to steer the process of regional security order-building were seen as weak, despite the grouping's efforts to consolidate and strengthen ASEAN's cohesiveness through the promise of an ASEAN Community. Many argued that ASEAN's approach that relies on the promise of cooperative behaviour through a strategy of "omni-enmeshment"¹ within ASEAN-driven multilateral processes --such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), the ADMM, and the East Asian Summit (EAS)—was hampered by internal differences within ASEAN itself: from different levels of economic development, diversity in political system, internal stability, and diverging strategic orientation. In short, there was a degree of scepticism among its extra-regional partners regarding the relevance and ability of ASEAN to serve as an effective manager of regional order.

ASEAN tried to address the criticisms by taking an initiative that would open up the possibility for a more inclusive and more promising regional order to emerge. In 2010, it agreed to extend the invitation to the US and Russia to join the EAS, to which both extra-regional powers responded positively. While this initiative is still anchored within the tradition of "ASEAN's centrality" and ASEAN-led process, it registers a greater willingness on the part of ASEAN to share the authority to set the agenda of regional conversation with all extra-regional powers in a high-level forum such as the EAS. Indeed, the expanded EAS, in my view, provides an opportunity for ASEAN not only to reinforce its diplomatic relevance but also to shape a regional security order through which it could seek to achieve the five main strategic objective mentioned above.

¹ On this strategy, see Evelyn Goh, "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies," *International Security*, vol. 32, No. 3 (Winter 2007/2008), pp. 113-157.

However, one should also recognise that such an ASEAN-preferred regional order, while necessary, is not sufficient to ensure peace and stability in the region. Three difficult problems remain. First, due to its nature as a grouping of lesser powers, ASEAN cannot act independently of major powers. In this context, it can be argued that any regional order in Southeast Asia will require a stable balance of power among major powers. ASEAN-driven multilateral processes, therefore, would not function well without some sort of balance in the relationship among major powers. But, at the same time, ASEAN is not in the position to create such a balance.

Second, while ASEAN has agreed on a common platform of regional order, there are still nuances in individual member state's priorities and preference in responding to the changing regional politics. It is a reality that some ASEAN member states are allies of the US, while others are either close to China or remain "non-aligned." These differences in strategic orientation among member states, despite their declared commitment to ASEAN's centrality and ASEAN's vision of regional order, would inevitably bring about some nuances in individual member state's response to the ongoing strategic change in the region.

Third, it requires a stronger and more cohesive ASEAN. Here, the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), despite its declaratory intent, remains problematic. As an aspiration, the APSC is almost complete. The APSC seeks to build normative foundation of conflict management (norms-setting and norms-building). It seeks to strengthen domestic institutional bases for conflict management (political development). It also seeks to prevent inter-state conflict (conflict prevention). It also seeks to resolve conflict (conflict resolution). It even seeks to rebuild after conflict (post-conflict peace-building). In other words, the APSC continues to face the problem of implementation.

Indonesia's Response

How has Indonesia responded to power shift in the region? It has done so by relying on three-track approaches. First, normatively, Indonesia's foreign policy has to abide by the principle of *bebas-aktif* (free and active). This principle requires Indonesia not to take side in any rivalry between great powers. In the context of emerging US-Sino rivalry, that principle has been translated in Indonesia's attempt to maintain good and close relations with both great powers. Relationship with China, which was suspended since 1967 until the restoration of diplomatic ties in August 1990, has improved significantly over the last two decades. In April 2005, Indonesia even concluded a strategic partnership agreement with China, which serves as the basis for a stable and mutually beneficial relationship. Relationship with the US, which was strained during President George Bush administration, has now taken a new turn. Under the Obama presidency, the US has also begun to view of Indonesia as an important regional partner. Both Indonesia and the US are now committed to forge a closer relationship under the Comprehensive Partnership Agreement (CPA).

Second, together with other ASEAN states, Indonesia seeks to create a "dynamic equilibrium" among major powers in the region. Indonesia realises that no regional country would be able to address the emerging security challenges by working alone. In

this regards, regional cooperation becomes relevance and important to address security challenges stemming from strategic uncertainties brought about by geo-political changes in the region. Indonesia has played an active role in shaping the emerging regional architecture in the region by ensuring ASEAN's centrality while encouraging greater participation by other major and regional powers in the regional processes. It has done so by supporting the inclusion of India, Australia and New Zealand in the EAS and, in 2010, inviting the US and Russia to become members of the grouping. Indonesia has also taken steps to encourage ASEAN to consolidate itself. Through the EAS process --together with other processes such as the APT, the ARF, and the ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus)-- Indonesia supported ASEAN's initiative to provide institutional framework and mechanism that would hopefully facilitate cooperative relationship among the major powers, especially between the US and China.

Third, Indonesia also seeks to improve its bilateral relations with other major and middle powers in the Asia-Pacific. Indonesia's relations with Japan continue to occupy an important place in Indonesia's foreign relations. With India, bilateral relations have also begun to improve. Indonesia recognises that India is increasingly becoming an important East Asian power on its own right. Australia and South Korea constitute two important regional partners for Indonesia. While Australia constitutes the closest neighbour for Indonesia and the interests of both countries are closely linked, Indonesia's relations with South Korea have always been a good one. South Korea is an important trading partner and a source of foreign investment to Indonesia. To emphasise the importance of these countries to Indonesia, Jakarta has signed strategic partnership agreements with all of them. Indonesia's partnership with these major and middle powers clearly reflects Jakarta's desire to see that the emerging regional order would not be dominated only by the US and China.

Indonesia's response to the emerging regional order can also be described as a "hedging strategy" against uncertainty in the intentions of two great powers-- the US and China. Despite recent improvements in bilateral relations, Indonesia continues to view the US as a hegemonic power with whom it has many converging and diverging interest. Until very recently, the relationship with China has always been problematic. As China's rise to great-power status has become inevitable, it is still uncertain whether a powerful China will continue to be a "benign" partner. Indonesia's hedging strategy, therefore, is aimed at (a) moderating the potentially negative implications of the rise of China for regional order and (b) reducing US' over dominance as a hegemonic power in the region. While the US' presence and engagement in Southeast Asia is needed for the first objective, the rise of China works to serve the latter. And, a central element in Indonesia's response to the rise of China and the primacy of US' presence in the region has been, and still is, a long-standing sense of distrust towards extra-regional great powers.