

# ASEAN FOCUS

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A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION PROVIDING CONCISE ANALYSES AND PERSPECTIVES ON ASEAN MATTERS

Non-Intervention &  
the Myanmar Conundrum

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Embracing Change to  
Stay Resilient

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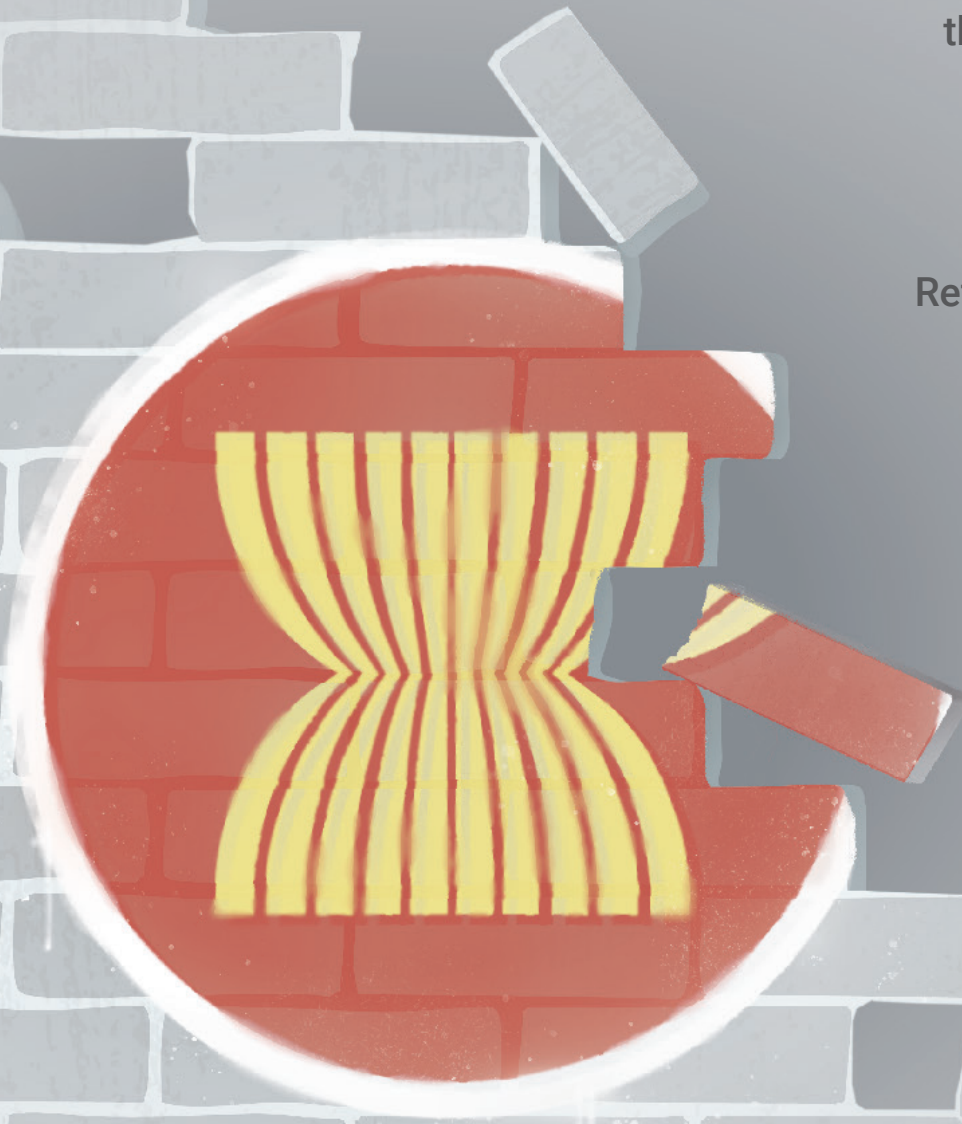
Rethinking Law in ASEAN's  
Rules-based Order

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Erosion of ASEAN  
Centrality

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#LeaveNoOneBehind



# RETHINKING ASEAN

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**ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute**  
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
Singapore 119614

E: [asc@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:asc@iseas.edu.sg)

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ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (formerly Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) is an autonomous organisation established in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security, and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The ASEAN Studies Centre (ASC) was established in 2008 under the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute to research on issues pertaining to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a regional organisation. The ASC is the first Institutional Recipient of the ASEAN Prize in 2020, a prestigious award to honour outstanding achievements of individuals or organisations who have made meaningful contributions to ASEAN.

# Editorial Notes

On the early dawn of 1 February 2021, the political earthquake of the military *coup d'état* in Myanmar and its aftershocks shook the international community and promises to upset the whole ASEAN agenda for the year. Exactly one month earlier, when Brunei took over the ASEAN chairmanship, little did it expect that the biggest test to its chairmanship theme “We Care, We Share, We Prosper” would come so soon, in such a dramatic way. How can ASEAN ‘care’, ‘share’ and ‘prosper’ when one of its member states is dysfunctional and illegitimate both at home and abroad? Would the ASEAN way of ‘quiet diplomacy’, ‘respect for sovereignty’ and ‘non-interference’ enable the grouping to navigate its way through the Myanmar crisis? If “crises are nature’s way of forcing change”, isn’t it now the time for ASEAN to push the envelope and break out of its old mould?

We do not presume any answer but we want to get the conversation going. The *Spotlight* theme of this *ASEANFocus* issue – Rethinking ASEAN – was conceived long before the coup took place but developments since 1 February have fuelled greater urgency to the debate. There has been no lack of soul-searching within ASEAN in times of crisis previously but the challenges confronting ASEAN today, from pandemics to geopolitics to domestic politics, are arguably much more intertwined and complex as countries in the region get more connected with each other and with the world. In this age of instant reaction and digital connectivity, whatever ASEAN does or does not do comes under intense scrutiny from within the region and around the world.

To raise the bar in this debate, we challenged a group of young scholars, unshackled by the successes or failures

of the past, to be deconstructionist in thinking about ASEAN. Apart from the burning issue of re-assessing ASEAN’s established norms and *modus operandi* in light of the Myanmar crisis, our *Spotlight* contributors also share their fresh views and innovative ideas on the role of law in ASEAN, ASEAN identity in the making, China’s looming shadow over the region, ASEAN in the treacherous waters of US-China rivalry and the South China Sea beyond geopolitics.

Beyond the *Spotlight*, the voices of the youths – who make up for one third of ASEAN’s population – are also channelled throughout the issue. In *Young Movers & Shakers @ ASEAN Community*, we profile promising, young Southeast Asians who have leveraged disruptive technologies and social entrepreneurship to contribute back to the society and environment. We are also delighted to feature Mr. Shoki Lin, a young Singaporean filmmaker for *Insider Views* and the pervasive youth volunteerism trend across the region during the COVID-19 pandemic for *Sights and Sounds*. We also invite you to explore the deep subterranean secrets of Southeast Asia.

Last but not least, we would like to extend our sincere thanks to Dr. Chong Ja Ian and Mr. Julio S. Amador III. Not only did they contribute their articles to this issue, but they also inspired us to reignite the debate on re-thinking ASEAN with ‘outside of the box’ thinking, provocative food for thought and bold policy recommendations. Winston Churchill once said, “To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often.” Perfection is neither demanded nor pragmatic for ASEAN. Our aim in this issue is to spark a discussion on making ASEAN a better version of itself for the ultimate benefit of its people now and in the future. 🇲🇻

# The Continuing Erosion of ASEAN Centrality

**Julio S. Amador III** argues that a politically cohesive and economically strong ASEAN is at the heart of its centrality in the region.

One of the most critical foundations that underpins ASEAN's credibility as a regional organisation is its capacity to play a central role in addressing regional affairs and in shaping the regional order. However, ASEAN's claim to its centrality continues to be eroded over the years, and its credibility increasingly questioned and to some extent challenged by external actors that have strategic interests in the region. That being said, the fundamental challenge to ASEAN's centrality comes more from within than from without, namely its failure to transform itself into a politically cohesive, strategically coherent and economically prosperous organisation.

While ASEAN continues to pay lip service to its myriad principles, norms and aspirations, it has thus far fallen short in its action to live up to these ideals, especially with regard to hard issues where ASEAN's credibility is at stake and where ASEAN's astute maneuvering is demanded. ASEAN's default mode remains to preserve the status quo and not to rock the boat. Meanwhile, the problems that come knocking on ASEAN's doors have increased in both intensity and variety, ranging from geopolitics to pandemics.

Lying at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region – the most geopolitically active and economically dynamic region in

the world – Southeast Asia has become an arena of the intensifying great power competition between the US and China. Any hope for a reset in US-China relations under the Biden Administration should now be tempered. Recent statements of US Secretary of State Anthony J. Blinken and US Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III explicitly rebuked China's destabilising and coercive actions, suggesting that the Biden Administration does not shy from pushing back against China when necessary. The US' enhanced engagement with the Quad in the past couple of months demonstrates that the Biden Administration will do so in close consultation and coordination with its allies and like-minded partners.

The US-China strategic rivalry in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain is crystallising in the South China Sea (SCS), adding another layer of tensions to the existing territorial and maritime disputes among the claimant states. Observing the ongoing war of words between top Chinese and US officials, ASEAN is more or less assured that it will be regularly pitted between the two superpowers flexing their muscles in the SCS. This body of water continues to be a prime theatre of US-China rivalry and ASEAN will have to take the first-row seat to this power dynamic. The SCS issue therefore will not go away from ASEAN's agenda in the foreseeable future.



United States Indo-Pacific Command@Flickr



Mobile market workers during COVID-19 pandemic in Antipolo City, Philippines

It is often said that power play is not alien to ASEAN and its member states. After all, Southeast Asia lies at the intersection of major powers' interests and interactions for centuries. However, what has confounded ASEAN's resilience and response this time is its internal disarray, both politically and economically.

Politically, ASEAN is facing one of its biggest crises following the February *coup d'état* in Myanmar. ASEAN member states maintain starkly divergent views on this matter and how ASEAN should respond. On a disconcerting note, this lack of consensus indicates that internal differences continue to inhibit ASEAN from becoming a politically cohesive bloc. By giving so much deference to the principle of non-intervention, ASEAN countries would rather stand on the side than defend the principles and ideals enshrined in the ASEAN Charter. It also does not help that the current ASEAN Chair, Brunei, does not have the political leverage to rally other member states to effectively respond to these critical developments. The Chair's anodyne statement from the Informal ASEAN Ministerial Meeting held on 2 March 2021 is a barometer to gauge how little political sway Brunei has at its disposal. Meanwhile, Indonesia's efforts to come up with ASEAN's meaningful interventions have yet to bear fruit, partly because the situation on the ground in Myanmar has been extremely volatile.

Economically, individual ASEAN countries are still reeling from the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Aside from Vietnam, other Southeast Asian countries suffered from economic contraction in 2020. The economic contraction across the region has resulted not only in decreased economic gains but also threatened to increase the inequality gap. While regional countries are somewhat optimistic that their economies will rebound in 2021, that optimism may be short-lived because the COVID-19 pandemic has not been brought under control yet. Given the varying capacities of ASEAN countries in combatting the pandemic, and how little intervention has been undertaken at the ASEAN level, the road to normalcy will take time.

These twin political and economic crises are detrimental to regional cohesion. ASEAN's embroilment in its own internal issues also impairs its ability to effectively respond to the brewing geopolitical tensions in the region. At this juncture, ASEAN is clearly distracted as its member states tend to their internal problems with a heightened sense of insecurity and defensiveness instead of looking for solutions through regional cooperation. This leaves ASEAN even more vulnerable to the power dynamics that continue to shape the region. This is because economically vulnerable and politically isolated ASEAN countries are at a greater risk of being exploited by those powers that seek to overturn the international rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region.

Some pundits have referred to ASEAN's achievements in the past to suggest that ASEAN will be able to navigate today's challenges. It is critical that we disabuse ourselves of this thinking, bearing in mind the new realities of today's world. Old strategies that may have worked before must be recalibrated under the current set-up and strategic environment. For example, on the issue of leadership, ASEAN currently does not have the likes of Suharto and Lee Kuan Yew who have the combined strategic foresight, political wherewithal and regional thinking to provide leadership at a time when it is most needed.

ASEAN should be cognizant of the fact that its centrality is not a given, rather it must be continuously exercised and earned. The true measure of ASEAN centrality is not simply found in its ability to bring different countries and all major powers together in one room. Rather, ASEAN centrality must be grounded in its member states' collective ability and coherent strategy to effectively respond to regional challenges and substantively shape the discourse in the direction that contributes to regional stability and development. After all, what is the value of ASEAN centrality if all the bloc can do is to provide a talking space for others, and not act on it?

**Mr. Julio S. Amador III** is Interim President of the Foundation for the National Interest, the Philippines.

# Embracing Change to Stay Resilient

**Shafiah F. Muhibat** emphasises that ASEAN must amend the ASEAN Charter to be responsive and effective in dealing with today's challenges.



Protests in Bangkok against the military coup in Myanmar

The past twelve months have been extremely challenging for ASEAN. From the still raging COVID-19 pandemic to the current scramble for the virus vaccines, from the ongoing tensions in the South China Sea to the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar, one shock after another has hit the region. Does ASEAN play any meaningful role in assisting its member states to overcome these challenges? How resilient is ASEAN as a regional institution to these shocks?

As the political crisis in Myanmar continues to deteriorate and the military government doubles down its repression of pro-democracy protests with more and more civilian casualties reported daily, criticisms towards ASEAN and the calls for ASEAN to take action have grown louder from both the international community and the Myanmar people. ASEAN is clearly rattled as what is going on in Myanmar is a serious breach of the principles enshrined in the ASEAN Charter and the 2012 ASEAN Declaration of Human Rights.

I don't quite agree with those who portray this current difficult episode as 'ASEAN's failure' or view the current Myanmar crisis as a bellwether of 'ASEAN's doomsday'. ASEAN has gone through many internal and external shocks since its establishment. It has sought to play

a constructive and meaningful role in some regional problems – most notably the Kampuchea issue in the 1980s and the early 1990s – while turning a blind eye to others. While regularly facing criticisms from both within and outside of the region, ASEAN has thus far prevailed as the premier institution for regional cooperation in Southeast Asia and it possesses the convening power that is valued by all of its external partners.

ASEAN's ability to withstand shocks and crises in the past, however, does not automatically translate into its future resilience going forward. In 2018, the ASEAN leaders issued their Vision for a Resilient and Innovative ASEAN, which aims for ASEAN to navigate today's challenges "in a coordinated, integrated and effective manner". The document reiterates many ASEAN's longstanding principles as well as ASEAN goals and targets. But a document alone is not sufficient to bring about a responsive institution and a resilient region.

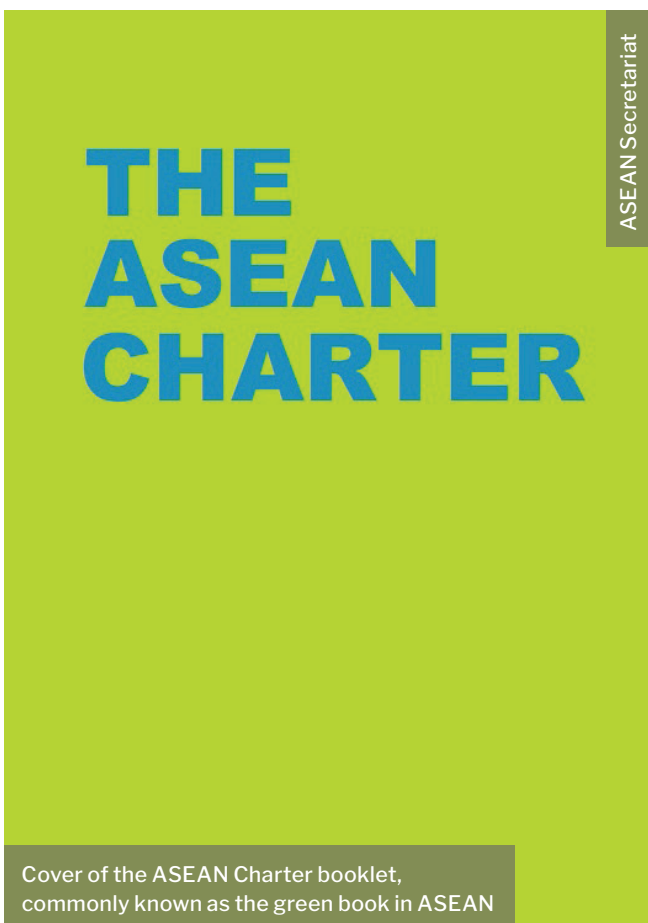
An institution can only do so much as the rules of the game allow. As the title of the above Vision suggests, to be resilient, ASEAN has to be innovative. Yet, ASEAN's rules of the game have remained essentially unchanged over the past five decades. The process of ASEAN institution-building has been relatively slow even though expectations on what ASEAN should deliver are high.

Amitav Acharya has long argued that institution-building in ASEAN is more a 'process-oriented' phenomenon than an outcome of structural changes in the international system.

ASEAN's underwhelming response to the current Myanmar crisis has exposed its weaknesses which are embedded in its decision-making process and institutional design. Indonesia's shuttle diplomacy, which included foreign minister Retno Marsudi's trips to Brunei, Singapore and Thailand, followed by an ASEAN informal ministerial meeting, has yielded little success thus far. Indonesia's strongly worded expression of concerns over the situation in Myanmar seemed to be supported by only some ASEAN member states while others avoided making any statement at all. Following the ministerial meeting, Brunei just released a dull chair's statement, which only highlighted the divide among ASEAN member states on this matter.

Indonesia's initiative and activism could not go far because it is not supported by the very principles that underpin ASEAN, especially consensus decision-making and non-interference. The magnitude of the Myanmar crisis requires ASEAN to be bold and act fast but the rules of the game dictate that ASEAN can only go slowly and at a pace comfortable to all. Many innovative efforts to get around the rules have been left frustrated by these built-in fundamental stumbling blocks.

Isn't it now the prime time for ASEAN to reinvent itself? The Mid-Term Review of the ASEAN Community



Vision 2025 includes, among others, a review of the implementation of the ASEAN Charter. Looking at the current state of affairs of ASEAN, what is urgent is not a review of the implementation of the Charter but rather a review of the Charter itself. It is high time to take it seriously given the urgency of the challenges confronting ASEAN at the moment. Naturally, change always invites resistance. After all, these are the principles that have attracted Southeast Asian countries to ASEAN in the first place and kept them banded together as ASEAN. A fundamental change to the way ASEAN works will reshuffle the whole dynamic of how ASEAN member states interact with each other and how they can promote and reconcile their different national interests within and through the grouping.

Despite all the risks, I remain convinced that it is time for ASEAN to review the ASEAN Charter to remove these built-in stumbling blocks to become an institution that is equipped to face the 21<sup>st</sup> century dynamics and challenges. A strong and responsive ASEAN will contribute to a more resilient Southeast Asia in the face of many shocks that are bound to come in the future.

As far as Indonesia is concerned, ASEAN remains important for the country and vice-versa. As the largest member of ASEAN and the world's third largest democracy, Indonesia's leadership in ASEAN is welcomed and called upon, especially in times of crisis. Despite sporadic distractions, Indonesia's foreign policy activism in ASEAN has a longstanding track record. However, this cannot be taken for granted going forward. Having ASEAN as a major vehicle of Indonesia's foreign policy nowadays requires more persuasion and evidence of results. Given the pragmatic outlook of the current leadership and the public's increased exposure to regional affairs, Indonesia's foreign policy 'investment' in ASEAN must be seen to bear fruit. Indonesia, therefore, should take the lead in changing ASEAN for the better, starting with the long-overdue review of the ASEAN Charter.

**Dr. Shafiah F. Muhibat** is Head of the Department of International Relations at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Indonesia.

# ASEAN's Non-Intervention and the Myanmar Conundrum

**Chong Ja Ian** underlines the pressing need to re-think ASEAN's non-intervention in the aftermath of the *coup d'état* in Myanmar.

**M**utual non-intervention is a core ASEAN tenet that together with consensus decision-making, respect for sovereign autonomy and peaceful resolution of differences form the operating principles of the grouping, as codified in the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC). The February 1 *coup d'état* in Myanmar and the Tatmadaw's violent suppression of opposition to its power grab, however, highlights the challenges and risks that strict adherence to non-intervention can pose to ASEAN. The situation in Myanmar and its broader consequences provide a pressing reminder of the need for ASEAN to consider, perhaps even develop, greater flexibility and precision in its conceptualisation and application of non-intervention. Reform could enable ASEAN to serve its members more fully in a world where the nature of tumult and uncertainty departs from past Cold War experiences. After all, an organisation's relevance rests on its ability to fulfil its key stakeholders' ongoing needs rather than just holding onto the past.

## ASEAN's Non-Intervention Approach

ASEAN's emphasis on mutual non-intervention at the time of its founding in 1967 is understandable. Except for Thailand, other member states had freshly emerged from colonial rule – Indonesia had to fight itself out from centuries of Dutch rule. There were regional differences and disputes as well. The Philippines claimed the territory of Sabah, incorporated into Malaysia in 1963. Malaysia and Singapore had just resolved a nasty Indonesian-backed low-intensity insurgency in the form of the *Konfrontasi*, which lasted from 1963 to 1966. Brunei, which joined ASEAN on independence in 1984, experienced a supposedly Indonesian-instigated insurgency in 1962. Singapore had split with Malaysia in 1965, after a failed two-year experiment with merger.

Moreover, ASEAN's early members had to confront communist challenges that received at least some political support from the People's Republic of China (PRC). Domestic political entanglements by outside actors were sources of friction, trouble, and pain. Non-intervention enabled these countries to put aside historical baggage and complications to coordinate in the face of the intensifying Cold War conflict in Indochina.

## Coup and Consequences

Myanmar's February 1 coup and its aftermath raise questions about the degree to which a strict interpretation of non-intervention continues to unambiguously support the interests of ASEAN and its members. As order breaks down between widespread resistance to the coup and the military's use of force, Myanmar risks a humanitarian disaster that threatens to spill across its borders. Potential refugee flows across land and sea borders could dwarf that of the 2017 Rohingya crisis. Deteriorating conditions can prompt a revival of the narcotics trade, piracy, human smuggling, trafficking in conflict gems, as well as fights over control of these activities and the profits generated. Terrorists too may find refuge in the confusion. Efforts by the various ethnic regions to pull away from a centre dominated by the junta can amplify these worrying dynamics, especially if their armed wings clash with a Tatmadaw insistent on control.

None of the above developments bode well for regional peace and stability, particularly at a time when there is a need to focus on the pandemic and recovery. Addressing these challenges belatedly or inadequately may invite more intervention by extra-regional actors who find their interests harmed by the disorder, much like a 2004 proposal for the US Navy to patrol the Malacca Strait to address piracy – except on a larger scale. Such a move



Police crackdown on anti-coup protesters in Yangon, Myanmar on 8 March 2021



by one major power is likely to instigate parallel moves by others. The recent broadening of US and Japanese coast guard missions in the wake of the PRC's new Maritime Police Law and deployment of maritime militia in disputed waters may be a prelude to such rising antagonism. These developments could introduce more direct major power competition to Southeast Asia in ways that will increase pressure on ASEAN and its members.

There are other political complications for ASEAN too. Given ASEAN's consensus model, full participation by the Myanmar junta puts it in a position to stall or even veto critical decisions should the grouping fail to give them the due they desire. Extending the junta *de facto* recognition could also signal to ambitious actors inside various ASEAN members that there is implicit acceptance of armed power grabs and encourage similar behaviour. However, suspending or ejecting the junta could leave ASEAN and its members with fewer direct channels to Myanmar and risk the junta adopting unfriendly or other disruptive positions.

Keeping a Myanmar represented by the Tatmadaw as an active ASEAN member means that junta heads will regularly join events, as seen with the recently concluded ASEAN Chiefs of Defence Forces' Meeting. US and European leaders are likely to balk at the prospect of appearing next to coup leaders, especially the former given sensitivities following the Capitol Insurrection. More limited and less robust engagement with such major international partners may mean that ASEAN becomes less able to demonstrate its centrality and play a bridging role in world politics, calling its relevance into further question.

### **Options Available, Paths Not Taken**

ASEAN and its members have options when it comes to facing the crisis in Myanmar. Either as a group or individually, ASEAN members can publicise commercial transactions that companies in their jurisdictions have with Myanmar, allowing other actors to take necessary remedial action. They can suspend the transfer of weapons-related and dual-use technologies, including cybersecurity services, to Myanmar pending an end to state violence. State-linked firms can suspend operations with Tatmadaw-related entities to provide examples for private enterprises, while also avoiding reputational damage. Targeted sanctions can be placed on key individuals or firms associated with violence towards unarmed civilians, with the relaxing of these sanctions tied to their willingness to enter and make progress on negotiations.

ASEAN members, either separately or together, have points of diplomatic leverage as well. They can continue to withhold formal recognition of the junta regime and do so more clearly, while engaging with both the junta and the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) as well as providing good offices for talks. Maintaining Myanmar's seat at international bodies such as the United Nations (UN) for the civilian administration until an end to the crisis offers another means to nudge the junta in the direction of a negotiated settlement.

There can as well be thinking about providing safe passage and safe havens for junta leaders should this be necessary to diffuse tensions. ASEAN or its members can further work with parties such as the European Union (EU), the US and the UN to explore these possibilities. Such steps can build on and enhance Indonesia's current efforts to cobble together a coherent ASEAN response.

Coordinated diplomatic action and even cross-border involvement has an ASEAN precedent, of course. During the 1979-1991 Third Indochina War, ASEAN members worked with the US and the PRC to enable the Khmer Rouge to retain Cambodia's UN representation. These efforts came against repeated attempts by Vietnam and the Soviet Union to seat the Hanoi-installed Cambodian government. Controversially, ASEAN members provided arms and material assistance to the Khmer Rouge and its partners. Such ASEAN efforts helped pave the way for the end of the Third Indochina War and reconciliation in Cambodia. That said, such involvement may have been easier since Cambodia and Vietnam were then outside ASEAN.

Distinguishing today's ASEAN from its older 1980s version is political will. In its former guise, ASEAN was a collection of six conservative, authoritarian, anti-communist, developmentalist regimes during the Cold War. This meant a shared imperative among the members to guard against communist expansion in their neighbourhood, even if this meant temporary collaboration with the PRC and the Maoist Khmer Rouge. However, ASEAN's ten current members are far more diverse in terms of everything from economic development to regime type as well as foreign policy inclinations. They also face rising US-Sino tensions along with multiple domestic political distractions. Such conditions make common purpose harder to find, particular in relation to consensus and amending non-intervention.

### **Adapt or Atrophy**

ASEAN members hold on to the tenets of non-intervention and consensus probably even more resolutely than to their assertions of centrality and not wanting to choose sides between the US and the PRC. On the surface, this may look like another case of not-rocking-the-boat trumping considerations of longer-term course-corrections. The Myanmar coup and the crisis it sparked, however, is a reminder that gradual trends may be punctuated by moments of urgency and previously theoretical concerns can crash into reality and quickly snowball. Revising non-intervention is not jettisoning the principle but figuring out how and when to afford more flexibility given changing, sometimes pressing, circumstances. Making necessary calibrations before being forced to accept sub-optimal alternatives under unfavourable conditions or drifting towards terminal obsolescence may be the wiser decision to sustain ASEAN's viability and usefulness.

**Prof. Chong Ja Ian** is Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore (NUS). All comments are the author's own.

# Sovereignty as Responsibility

Sharon Seah examines long-held, cherished notions of relevance, centrality and sovereignty in the face of ASEAN's biggest crisis vis-à-vis Myanmar.



Protest in Yangon against the coup in February 2021

ASEAN constantly worries about its strategic relevance as the premier regional organisation, more so now in the post-COVID-19 world order than ever. Geopolitical tensions between the US and China and potential flashpoints in the region including the South China Sea and the Taiwan Straits, to name a few, are some of the security issues that persistently occupy ASEAN. These issues are now compounded by a global economic recession induced by the pandemic as well as the resurgence of protectionism and nationalism around the world against excessive globalisation and rising inequalities.

To deal with these thorny issues, ASEAN has worked hard and strategically over the last five decades to promote its version of regional multilateralism and ASEAN did so by placing itself at the centre of the regional architecture. ASEAN's establishment of key regional fora such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit and its Dialogue Partnership system created a web of inter-dependencies and helped ensure its own strategic relevance and thus centrality.

Every so often, ASEAN stops to think about its centrality, its own place within the regional architecture and whether it remains relevant to the international community. Nothing should worry ASEAN more than what is happening in its own backyard – the rapidly deteriorating

human rights situation in Myanmar that has seen weeks of brutal crackdown by the military junta against unarmed civilian protesters. If ASEAN cannot put its own house in order, it is of no credibility to anyone outside. A disunited ASEAN serves no purpose and certainly carries no relevance whatsoever. ASEAN must now start thinking about Myanmar's place in ASEAN, because Myanmar's place in ASEAN materially impacts ASEAN's place in the world.

ASEAN came out of 2020 on a relatively high note. Under the Chairmanship of Vietnam, ASEAN managed to get all members on board with a coordinated public health response, put in place a comprehensive COVID-19 recovery plan and sign the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership with five of its Dialogue Partners. There was even the possibility of an ASEAN-EU free trade agreement. It did appear that ASEAN stole a march on the other regional organisations at the end of that *annus horribilis*.

This has all changed with ASEAN now facing the biggest test of its unity and purpose. Since the military takeover of the government on 1 February, hundreds of thousands of Myanmar citizens have taken to the streets across the country to protest against the coup. Thousands of citizens residing outside of Myanmar have taken to demonstrating in their host countries to seek help for

their fellow countrymen and women under threat. What started as banging of pots and pans to express their unhappiness rapidly evolved into strikes by essential workers, peaceful mass protests, nightly candlelit vigils and silent strikes. As UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres declared that “Coups have no place in the modern world”, the rest of world watched days of horrifying images of military men shooting protestors, throwing tear gas, harassing and killing of young children. All of this has been broadcast real time on social media platforms right into devices in our hands. It promises to be worse than the television images of violence of Afghanistan, Libya or Iraq in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The informal ASEAN ministerial meeting initiated by Indonesian foreign minister Retno Marsudi in early March 2021 has failed to change the Tatmadaw’s course of action. Despite ASEAN’s urging of restraint, the Tatmadaw continues to ratchet up levels of lethal force on its own population. Some individual ASEAN states have condemned these actions as “deplorable”, “inexcusable” and “shameful”. But ASEAN collectively has refrained from even using the word “coup”, much less condemn these actions. There are efforts underway to convene an ASEAN Leaders’ meeting to discuss the matter, but it appears that consensus is elusive.

Much has been said and written about respect for state sovereignty and how the principles of sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, non-interference and consensus underpin ASEAN’s entire existence. Indeed, these are important principles that modern states respect and abide by. These are the same principles enshrined in the UN Charter. There is and can be no quarrel with these principles if we are to live in peace and harmony. The danger lies in ASEAN’s over emphasis on rights without responsibilities. The first refrain that we hear whenever any crisis confronts ASEAN is a reference to how states must not interfere in each other’s internal affairs. This is an inference to the fact that any utterance of criticism could be interpreted as interference and therefore an impingement on one’s sovereignty. Cambodia, and Thailand have maintained that the Myanmar coup is an “internal matter” whereas Vietnam and Laos have remained silent.

In describing the role and responsibility of the Sovereign, Thomas Hobbes points to the breakdown of the social contract between individuals and the sovereign “if the sovereign threatens the individual with death” or if it “could no longer fulfil the function for which he or she is given power”. Hobbesian theory forms present-day notions of sovereignty. The idea of sovereignty as responsibility, developed by Francis Deng in the 1990s, eventually made its way to the 2005 World Summit where it was adopted by world leaders as UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/60/1 (paragraphs 138 and 139). It is commonly known as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). When invoked together with Chapter VII of the UN Charter which empowers the UN Security Council to use its powers to maintain peace, the possibility of collective UN military intervention is there.

R2P is badly received among developing countries in the world because of the fear of abuse of this concept. When the French foreign minister proposed invoking R2P during Cyclone Nargis to forcibly deliver foreign aid to Myanmar, there was disquiet and opposition from ASEAN states. ASEAN immediately went to work by creating a mechanism for foreign aid to be delivered under its auspices, thus obliterating the need for R2P. We now hear and see the Myanmar people calling for R2P.

If we strip down R2P to Francis Deng’s original concept of sovereignty as responsibility, no legitimate state can deny its responsibility to protect its population. Failure to do so, and worse, to be *the* perpetrator of harm, is unacceptable. The second part of the idea of sovereignty as responsibility is the idea that fellow states must assist the troubled state in discharging its duties. But this runs contrary to the principle of non-interference.

ASEAN countries must have a real hard think about Myanmar. Can ASEAN relax its positivist view of sovereignty as right and embrace sovereignty as responsibility? Do fellow ASEAN states view it as their responsibility to assist other fellow member states in discharging state responsibilities? Is this the time for ASEAN to adjust the norm of non-interference? Under international law, the breach of *jus cogens*, a set of pre-emptory norms that cannot be derogated under any circumstances, examples of which include genocide, crimes against humanity, torture, slavery and aggression, is serious.

There will not be any military intervention by ASEAN nor will ASEAN encourage such actions. But there has to be “constructive engagement” with Myanmar. There is absolutely no option for ASEAN to backtrack on its engagement with Myanmar. Whether diplomatically or back-end channelling through military or business contacts, the engagement must continue but it should not be the type of business-as-usual engagement on regional matters. It has to be intensive discussions with the Tatmadaw, the National League for Democracy (NLD), the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) and other key stakeholders at all levels. Most importantly, this should be done behind-the-scenes, away from watchful eyes or leaked tweets.

ASEAN has famously said that the organisation recognises “states, not governments” back in 1997 when justifying their admission of questionable members such as Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. But when a state behaves like a pariah ignoring the norms of international law, blatantly breaching *jus cogens*, ASEAN cannot sit still and watch. Its centrality must first start from within, in its own neighbourhood.

**Ms. Sharon Seah** is Coordinator of the ASEAN Studies Centre and Coordinator of the Climate Change in Southeast Asia Programme at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

# Hang Together or Hang Separately?

**Hoang Thi Ha** argues that ASEAN member states must regain their unity of purpose and identity with the region to make ASEAN work better.

**F**rom the 1967 Bangkok Declaration to the 2007 ASEAN Charter, from the five-member sub-regional grouping to a ten-country organisation that represents Southeast Asia, from the original Association of Southeast Asian Nations to the self-proclaimed ASEAN Community today, ASEAN has undergone many make-overs to stay relevant to changing times. Yet, its intergovernmental fundamentals, anchored in the one country-one vote decision-making, remain unchanged. ASEAN has been resilient in the past over five decades not by being institutionally optimal but by being politically acceptable and comfortable to all its member states. ASEAN therefore moves ahead where there is a unity of purpose among its members. Where there is not, it just stays idle or muddles along.

Much has been said about ASEAN's disunity on the South China Sea issue as its member states calibrate their divergent responses subject to their perceived national interests not only in relation to ASEAN but more importantly to China – their vital, if not most vital, economic partner. The current Myanmar crisis is another exposé of the lack of unity of purpose among ASEAN member states despite the magnitude of its negative impact on ASEAN. Jawaharlal Nehru once said “Crises and deadlocks when they occur have at least this advantage, that they force us to think.” As the situation in Myanmar continues to worsen and ASEAN's attempts to play a constructive role have failed thus far, the pressure has been stepped up on ASEAN

to shake itself out of its path dependency, to think the once unthinkable and do the once impossible. But do ASEAN member states feel the same heat? Can they get their act together?

The non-intervention principle is often cited as the institutional constraint that prevents ASEAN from taking a more proactive role in the unfolding political turbulence in Myanmar. But too much focus on non-interference may elude the underlying problem of ASEAN's current dilemma – that the remaining nine member states (ASEAN-9) are not on the same page on how ASEAN should deal with Myanmar and to what extent.

At the Informal ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on 2 March 2021, Singapore foreign minister Vivian Balakrishnan made an impassioned statement on the importance of demonstrating ASEAN's unity and credibility on the Myanmar issue: “It is critical that ASEAN continues to reiterate our guiding principles in light of the unfolding tragedy in Myanmar. If not, we will have no choice but to state our views on the situation as individual ASEAN member states. But quite frankly, this would starkly underscore our lack of unity, and undermine our credibility and relevance as an organisation.” That is exactly what turned out afterwards. Singapore, together with Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, released the individual statements that their ministers delivered at the meeting. It is not by coincidence that they are also the more forward-leaning countries within ASEAN which have called for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political detainees as well as peaceful dialogue among all relevant parties for a return to democratic transition.



ASEAN's Founding Fathers at the Bangkok meeting on 8 August 1967

Meanwhile, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam have been less vocal. These countries may not necessarily support the Tatmadaw's forceful takeover but they do not want yet another precedent for external interference in their own domestic affairs. Cambodian and Thai leaders – who have administered democratic backsliding in their own countries – characterised the coup as “an internal affair” of Myanmar. Intriguingly, Phnom Penh invoked ASEAN's principle of non-interference for the 2021 Myanmar coup, but it weighed in heavily when the military coup in Thailand in 2014 removed the Yingluck-camp caretaker government which was considered friendlier to Cambodia. As noted by the late Secretary-General of ASEAN, Rodolfo Severino, keeping to non-intervention is “a matter of national self-interest rather than a mindless adherence to a doctrine or dogma”.

The exercise of non-interference in ASEAN has so far been more nuanced than generally depicted. There has been no lack of painstaking effort by ASEAN to reconcile this principle with the imperative to consult and influence each other on matters that affect ASEAN's common interest and regional peace and stability. This includes the ongoing endeavours by Indonesia and other like-minded ASEAN member states to effect positive change in Myanmar. After all, non-interference is not the only principle enshrined in the ASEAN Charter. It should be interpreted and applied in balance with the principles of “shared commitment and collective responsibility in enhancing regional peace, security and prosperity” (Art. II.2(b)), “adherence to the rule of law, good governance, the principles of democracy and constitutional government” (Art. II.2(h)) and “enhanced consultations on matters seriously affecting the common interest of ASEAN” (Art. II.2(g)). Since the current Myanmar crisis has become a crisis of ASEAN itself, internally and externally, non-interference should not be seen as the insurmountable institutional barrier to ASEAN's action on this matter.

Likewise, the application of ASEAN-minus-X or ASEAN-9 to move the regional agenda forward should be considered within the realm of possibility due to two factors. First of all, Myanmar military authorities are not conferred legitimacy both at home and abroad, including within ASEAN, and its state capacity is also dysfunctional due to the ongoing widespread civil disobedience movement (CDM) in the country. Second, since ASEAN habitually refers to past practices for a guide in the present, there was an historical precedent of ASEAN-minus-X when the People Power Revolution took place in the Philippines in 1986. The then ASEAN foreign ministers of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, without the participation of the Philippines, issued an ASEAN joint statement to express their concern and call for restraint and peaceful resolution to the political turmoil in the country.

ASEAN should also leverage its membership card as both a carrot and a stick to exert greater pressure on the Myanmar military authorities. Despite having no provision on suspension/termination of membership, the ASEAN Charter requires its member states to take all necessary

measures effectively to implement its provisions and to comply with all obligations of membership (Art. 5.2). This clause provides a sound legal basis for ASEAN to seriously consider the possibility of temporarily suspending Myanmar's membership if its military authorities intensify violent crackdown on protestors or if the current political deadlock deteriorates into an armed conflict.

All these bold measures – overcoming the non-interference principle, applying ASEAN-minus-X and withholding the membership card – are not legally or institutionally impermissible. The problem is that they are politically unattractive because some, if not most or all, ASEAN member states would worry that they might be ‘another Myanmar’ in the future. Although all of them are cognizant of the corrosive impact of the Myanmar crisis on ASEAN's credibility and the regional agenda, especially in relations with Dialogue Partners, their degrees of concern vary greatly. Given the tenuous nature of political developments in most ASEAN member states, the instinctive choice would be to cautiously guard their narrowly defined national or ruling regime interests which most often eclipse concerns over ASEAN's credibility and the broader regional interests that ASEAN represents.

At the Bangkok meeting that gave birth to ASEAN on 8 August 1967, Singapore's first foreign minister S. Rajaratnam astutely remarked that giving life to ASEAN is to “marry national thinking with regional thinking”, to “think of not only our national interests but posit them against regional interests”. The region has come a long way since then but the relationship between national thinking and regional thinking within ASEAN remains a tenuous marriage of convenience. At the heart of ASEAN's institutional ossification and intellectual inertia today is the lacklustre commitment to regionalism on the part of its member states, hence their failure to identify with and duly invest in ASEAN so that the organisation can serve them better in the long haul. They often ask ‘What has ASEAN delivered to us?’ without internalising the fact that their free-riding approach has inherently constrained ASEAN's ability to deliver better. Institutional reforms are certainly necessary to help ASEAN rise above its longstanding limitations. But for it to happen, it needs the buy-in of ASEAN member states based on their enlightened self-interest. Therefore, to quote the late Severino again, “institutional strengthening and intensifying a sense of identity with the region are mutually reinforcing and have to be simultaneously pursued”.

**Ms. Hoang Thi Ha** is Fellow and Lead Researcher (Political-Security Affairs) at the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

# Rethinking Law in ASEAN's Rules-based Order

Tan Hsien-Li examines the role of law in building a rules-based ASEAN Community.

The ASEAN Charter would have been in force for 13 years by the end of 2021. According to the ASEAN website, the Charter “serves as a firm foundation in achieving the ASEAN Community by providing legal status and institutional framework for ASEAN. It also codifies ASEAN norms, rules and values; sets clear targets for ASEAN; and presents accountability and compliance”. Yet, compared to these initial lofty ambitions, this supposedly ‘constitutional breakthrough’ of ASEAN has been underwhelming.

The Charter aims to build a rules-based ASEAN Community, but considerable work remains to fully realise this goal. The ASEAN Community was launched in 2015 with the understanding that community-building is an ongoing process. Unmet goals in the Roadmap for an ASEAN Community (2009-2015) have been carried over to the ASEAN Vision 2025: Forging Ahead Together. Commitments under the new 2016-2025 Blueprints were made with open-ended operational modalities and timelines, especially in the political-security and socio-cultural pillars. Meanwhile, the highly- anticipated ASEAN Economic Community has yet to become a ‘single market and production base’. Regional leaders exhort perseverance in integration while analysts warn that integration needs to be accelerated and intensified if ASEAN wants to be globally competitive. Yet, in this narrative of ASEAN community-building, the role of law – the vehicle that underpins ASEAN’s post-Charter integration and cooperation – is often overlooked.

One reason may be normative and ideological – the ASEAN Way is traditionally ‘non-legalistic’. Another could be path dependency – it is not easy to change operational modality, especially if institutions are not fully equipped and personnel not specifically trained. It could also be that the language of the law is somewhat

alien and what the rules-based ASEAN requires is unclear, and circumspection arises from a lack of full understanding of what legal integration entails. Another reason could be that, despite the net benefit ultimately to each member state and the region collectively, the short-term transitional costs of integration are simply too high – there may be capacity and resource limitations; or freer markets could mean domestic products become less competitive and unemployment could rise.

Whatever the reasons for the lukewarm reception to legal integration, it is worth recalling what the member states seek to achieve through the Charter and how they expect to do it. As spelt out in the Eminent Persons Group Report on the ASEAN Charter (2006), the members’ main objective is unchanged since ASEAN’s establishment in 1967 – a collective quest for regional peace and security and economic prosperity. By signing the Charter, ASEAN members formally introduced the modality of law in how they would increasingly interact within the grouping and with the world, and thus be more effective and reliable in their collective commitments.

The Charter undertaking is the culmination of accumulative procedures, institutions, and laws (both hard binding treaties and soft declaratory instruments) in ASEAN, signalling the organisation’s transformation from one using flexible political-diplomatic modalities to one that henceforth adheres to the rule of law and institutions. Substantively, the member states desire ASEAN to be an economically integrated bloc attractive to foreign investors and linked up to the global market, thus competing effectively with China and India. Institutionally, they envision a stronger, more institutionalised ASEAN with a legal personality – but still remaining intergovernmental – and comparable to other international organisations in the world. The culmination of this metamorphosis is the formation of a tri-pillar (political-security, economic and socio-cultural) rules-based ASEAN Community by 2015.

Imbuing ASEAN with a strong legal identity is to enrich the organisation but not to change it into something radically different from what it inherently is. Hence, the Charter’s provisions on ASEAN’s purposes and principles codify its longstanding interests and values like security, sovereign independence, non-use of force, non-interference, peaceful dispute settlement, socio-economic development, integration into a single market and production base and ASEAN centrality in foreign relations. To compel compliance, the Charter instituted mechanisms to resolve disputes across



three communities. Article 24 provides that economic disputes “shall be settled in accordance with the ASEAN Protocol on Enhanced Dispute Settlement Mechanism” while disputes that do not concern the interpretation or application of any ASEAN instrument “shall be resolved peacefully in accordance with the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation”. In departure from ASEAN’s erstwhile ‘litigation-averse’ culture, the ‘catch-all’ Article 25 stipulates “appropriate dispute settlement mechanisms, including arbitration, be established for disputes involving any ASEAN instrument”.

While all this might sound ‘overly legalistic’, it is not normatively difficult to square it with the ASEAN Way if we think of ASEAN’s legal turn in integration and cooperation as being rules-based. Compliance notwithstanding, laws and institutions became increasingly part of ASEAN’s pre-2007 development, especially after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the adoption of the 2003 Bali Concord II. The Charter merely entrenches the rule of law as a new norm and as part of the ASEAN Way.

Furthermore, law does not undermine member autonomy but facilitates state and collective interests. The Charter crystallises ASEAN’s intergovernmental and state-centric priorities – sovereignty is given utmost respect in collective decision-making. This is clear in how ASEAN operations are overseen by the ASEAN Summit and ministerial-level councils, and how decision-making at all levels must adhere to consultation and consensus. As ASEAN dispute settlement procedures have not been activated – this should not be deemed a failure since it is the member states’ prerogative to choose whether to litigate – fears that ASEAN could become overly legalistic or litigious or that supranationalism might creep in via tribunal decisions are unfounded.

Against this backdrop, it would be disingenuous to disregard the role of law in ASEAN integration and imagine that states may still reserve the right to flexible action, e.g. potentially breaching commitments in the name of sovereignty. Sovereignty has already been exercised in adopting the Charter, and to renege on express obligations would be a breach of the basic international principle of *pacta sunt servanda* and acting in bad faith. For ASEAN to be a credible international person, members must uphold commitments and stick to agreed-upon timelines under both external and intra-ASEAN agreements.

Apart from its many treaties, especially in the economic pillar, ASEAN’s legal landscape includes soft laws like declarations, concords, blueprints and programmes of action. Despite being non-binding, these soft laws exert commitment pressures through deadlines and mutual expectations upon adoption. Even in the political-security and socio-cultural communities where instruments tend to be non-binding, there is the expectation that these collective goals should be met. After all, implementation and compliance underscore the member states’ objectives in adopting the ASEAN Charter.

There are positive signs that the ASEAN Community’s *sui generis* rules-based order is taking shape. This goes beyond the basic requirement of promulgating ASEAN treaties into national legislation or, where relevant, the formation of domestic policies to implement ASEAN directives, which does not require the lengthier and more complex legislative process. Given that arbitral tribunals continue to be avoided, the better way to ensure compliance with ASEAN rules is through monitoring. For economic integration, since 2016, the ASEAN Secretariat has improved its Monitoring and Evaluation Framework based on compliance monitoring (checking for implementation), outcomes monitoring (measuring the results of compliance) and impact evaluation (assessing if the community and local enterprises have benefited from integration). Monitoring, albeit nascent, of the political-security and socio-cultural pillars is being carried out. Closer monitoring, more intra-regional accountability and more transparent public data should be provided to strengthen monitoring protocols, thereby strengthening ASEAN integration and cooperation.

To add impetus to ASEAN’s rules-based community-building, its members should be more resolute in regional integration if there is data on the net benefit of doing so. Studies estimating the gains and challenges for each member state pursuant to a fully-functioning ASEAN free trade area that attracts foreign investment could be the catalyst in this respect. Of course, member countries would still contend with capacity and resource limitations, the demands and expectations of domestic constituencies, and their own foreign policies on bilateralism and multilateralism.

To advance ASEAN’s rules-based order, it is necessary to have professionals able to work within the regional ecosystem. Policymakers, practitioners and executives in the ASEAN Community, regardless of their disciplinary training and field of work, can use ASEAN laws and policies effectively to their benefit. For instance, businesspeople could enjoy lower costs from improved trade facilitation and litigate neutrally under national administrative law for errors or obstruction of ASEAN laws done in the day-to-day work of domestic officials. It is encouraging that increasing numbers of national and regional bureaucrats are familiar with ASEAN rules and their importance. The task now is to disseminate the knowledge of ASEAN rules and how they can be used by those who work within the ASEAN Community. For the longer term, teaching the rules-based ASEAN could be introduced in tertiary-level curricula, thus educating generations of ASEAN citizens on how to live and work within the Community. With discipline and determination, building a rules-based ASEAN will contribute to realising the developmental aspirations of every ASEAN member and every ASEAN citizen can enjoy the socio-economic fruits of regional integration.

**Dr. Tan Hsien-Li** is the Co-Director of the ASEAN Law and Policy Programme at the Centre for International Law, and Assistant Professor at the Law Faculty, National University of Singapore.

# Realising an ASEAN Identity through Tertiary Education

**Chanintira na Thalang** deconstructs the term ‘ASEAN identity’ and why it remains an aspiration rather than a reality.

Since the launch of the ASEAN Community in 2015, ASEAN countries have vowed to work towards a ‘people-centred, people-oriented community’ and set goals to promote an ‘ASEAN identity’. Six years on, how developed is this ‘ASEAN identity’? To what extent is it embraced by 650 million Southeast Asians from the political elites down to the grassroots level?

What ASEAN means by ‘ASEAN identity’ and how it can be achieved is vaguely defined. The ASEAN Vision 2020 envisions “the entire Southeast Asia to be, by 2020, an ASEAN community conscious of its ties of history, aware of its cultural heritage and bound by a common regional identity”. The Narrative to ASEAN Identity adopted by the ASEAN leaders in 2020 defines ‘ASEAN identity’ as “a process of social construct defined by both “Constructed Values” (respect, peace and security, prosperity, non-interference, consultation/dialogue, adherence to international law, democracy, freedom, human rights, unity in diversity, inclusivity, ASEAN centrality) and “Inherited Values” (such as spiritualism, kinship, communitarian/communalism, collectivism, tolerance, humility, social harmony, solidarity and humanity). This all-encompassing definition has a very broad, if not universal, scope. It contains largely abstract terms that do not elucidate on how these values will contribute towards fostering ‘ASEAN identity’ among Southeast Asians.

The late former Secretary-General of ASEAN Surin Pitsuwan gave a more straightforward explanation that building “ASEAN identity’ begins with creating awareness of ASEAN across cultures, generations and linguistic boundaries because “we want every ASEAN citizen to think of himself or herself as a national of a member country and as a citizen of ASEAN at the same time. When you say I’m a Thai, I’m also an ASEAN citizen. I am a Singaporean and also an ASEAN. I’m a Laotian and also an ASEAN. That is not here yet, we need to work on that.” In this regard, an identity is a social category which simply provides the answer to the question: ‘Who am I?’ As Surin implicitly suggested, it is possible to have multiple identities. A Scottish can also be British and European. Similarly, a Balinese can also be Indonesian. However, most ordinary citizens in Southeast Asia do not identify themselves with ASEAN or as Southeast Asians.

To date, there have been many initiatives taken by ASEAN, individual governments and the private sector to contribute to the regional identity project, especially by seeking to advance knowledge or awareness of ASEAN. The education sector stands out in its initiatives to promote learning on ASEAN. Universities across the region have developed their own ASEAN promotion campaigns including study programmes, compulsory



Children waving ASEAN flags in Chiang Rai, Thailand



and elective courses, seminars, summer schools, short study trips, credit transfer programmes and research grants. In fact, identity creation through education is a well-documented practice since education is also a form of socialisation. Most significantly, students are important because they are considered the future generation of the ASEAN Community.

ASEAN also sees the importance of education as a means to help promote a regional identity. The 2009-2015 Work Plan of the Initiative of ASEAN Integration (IAI) suggests promoting the ASEAN Community through the distribution of academic textbooks on Southeast Asia and ASEAN at all levels. ASEAN has produced ASEAN Curriculum Sourcebooks catered for primary and secondary students. Furthermore, the ASEAN University Network (AUN) has facilitated staff and student exchange programmes as well as online modules on ASEAN, just to name a few.

However, many challenges remain. Firstly, tertiary students account for a mere fraction of Southeast Asia's population and to what extent these students have been exposed to classes or other curricular activities related to ASEAN is unclear. According to the European Union Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region (SHARE) project, there are 12 million Southeast Asian students registered in 7,000 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), equivalent to around 2% of the region's population. However, whether these students have participated in ASEAN-related courses or activities is dependent on the extent to which their governments see the importance of encouraging HEIs to enhance awareness and knowledge about ASEAN or whether HEIs themselves see the importance of doing so.

Conversations with friends and colleagues in academia suggest that courses on Southeast Asia and/or ASEAN are most likely compulsory for students of Politics and International Relations. In addition, courses covering aspects of Southeast Asia are offered in other departments such as History, Cultural Studies, Sociology and Anthropology. However, courses on ASEAN and/or Southeast Asia are unavailable or less available to students who will eventually join the workforce in the six sectors aimed to enhance labour mobility as stipulated in ASEAN's Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs), including engineers and nurses. Thus, while such initiatives are a start, efforts need to be expanded across disciplines.

Secondly, in cases where courses on ASEAN and Southeast Asia are available, it is unclear to what extent the content of these courses covers ASEAN as an organisation as opposed to aspects of Southeast Asia as a region. This is not to deny the significance of learning about Southeast Asia and individual states. But if we are to develop a regional identity, it is important that students learn about different aspects of ASEAN including how it functions and contributes to the region and what are the benefits and shortcomings of regional cooperation under the ASEAN framework.



Thai students dressed in national ASEAN costumes celebrating the ASEAN Day

Thirdly, identity building is a continuous process which takes decades if not generations to construct. Essentially, the ASEAN identity-building project is asking Southeast Asians not only to accept a regional identity but also to re-conceptualise how they see themselves. Raising awareness of ASEAN among students should not stop upon their graduation. ASEAN and its member governments need to find ways to maintain the momentum of educational initiatives and public outreach programmes to ensure continuity beyond university grounds.

In 2013, my co-researcher Pinn Siraprasiri and I collected 2,003 survey responses among university students across all disciplines and from all parts of Thailand. The purpose of the research was to gauge their level of knowledge, attitudes and expectations of ASEAN. A surprising finding from the research was that students with lower levels of knowledge of ASEAN were more likely to have a positive attitude towards and have high expectations of ASEAN. In other words, students become increasingly disillusioned as they learn more about ASEAN. Part of the reason for this is that students are hard-pressed to find examples on how ASEAN has impacted their lives, let alone in a positive manner. Many also compared their experience with the European Union whose decisions have touched the everyday life of ordinary Europeans.

While the educational sector has been making small incremental steps in teaching about ASEAN, people in the region will only identify with ASEAN if it is seen and felt as a force for good in their lives. The biggest challenge to building 'ASEAN identity' remains with how ASEAN reinvents and transforms itself to have a greater and positive impact on the lives of ordinary citizens, not just the political elites. According to the State of Southeast Asia 2020 survey conducted by ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, the top concern about ASEAN among 74.9% of the survey's respondents was that ASEAN's tangible benefits are not felt by the people. As such, ASEAN remains a distant unknown to many. As John Locke duly notes, rational actors enter "into a community for their mutual good".

**Dr. Chanintira na Thalang** is Associate Professor of International Relations at Thammasat University, Thailand.

# Navigating Treacherous Waters: ASEAN amid Sino-US Rivalry

**Ngo Di Lan** opines that creative thinking and policy flexibility are central to ASEAN's optimal strategy on Sino-US rivalry.



**A**lthough President Trump was a highly disruptive political force, his four-year term did not fundamentally change US foreign policy in many key aspects, including its China policy. To counter Beijing's designs, the Trump Administration essentially continued Obama's "pivot to Asia", despite putting a new label on the old strategy and a greater emphasis on the competition element. Whatever their differences, the Democratic and Republican parties today have come to a consensus that China will remain the top strategic challenge that the US must face for the foreseeable future.

The great power competition between the US and China will continue for as long as both sides still harbour hegemonic ambitions. Since Southeast Asia has become a pivotal battleground for these two superpowers, the most pressing question for ASEAN is how to manage the Sino-US great power rivalry without compromising its survival as an independent institution or put regional security at risk. This in turn requires creative thinking on the part of ASEAN policymakers to find an optimal strategy that can strike a balance between these twin goals.

Conventional wisdom suggests that ASEAN cannot and should not take sides in the strategic competition between the US and China. It is easy to see the logic behind this argument. Both superpowers are vital political, security and economic partners for most if not all ASEAN countries. However, neither superpower can completely supplant the other. The US may pose less of a threat to the territorial integrity of ASEAN states but its engagement with the region may suffer from its geographical distance and the extensive reach of its global commitments. Conversely, China is a greater security threat to some ASEAN states but is also their economic lifeline. More importantly, China is here to stay. The entire region is condemned by geography to live with a powerful and ambitious neighbour to its north.

While this view is reasonable, it is unnecessarily inflexible. Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures. Even if ASEAN ultimately chooses to remain "neutral" in the US-China tug of war, it would be unwise to pre-commit themselves to such a policy as it would reduce its bargaining power vis-à-vis both great powers. Here the experiences of Vietnam could be instructive.

As the only ASEAN country that is a party to the South China Sea disputes and shares a land border with China, Vietnam has always had to walk a tightrope between Beijing and Washington. This is best embodied in its well-known "Three Nos" defence policy: no stationing of foreign troops on Vietnamese soil, no military alliance and no alignment with one country against another.

On the surface, this appears to be evidence that Vietnam pursues a pro-China line as it shuts the door to external balancing against potential Chinese threats. However, following the release of its 2019 Defense White Paper, Vietnam has significantly revised or at least clarified its position. General Nguyen Chi Vinh's interview for

*VNExpress* on the Vietnamese Independence Day in 2020 shows that Vietnamese leaders have a very particular understanding of what “no military alliance” entails. Specifically, he argues that this policy applies only to peaceful times and that Vietnam reserves the right to pursue necessary security relationships to safeguard its interests. Notably, he also claims that Vietnam has never had a military alliance, even though the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation that Vietnam signed with the Soviet Union in 1978 was a military alliance in all but name. The implication is that Vietnam could theoretically pursue a similar defence arrangement in the future if its security situation drastically worsens.

This move is strategically astute because on the one hand, it reassures China by disavowing clear anti-Chinese coalitions in peace times. On the other hand, it implicitly leaves the door open for strengthening security relations with the US. Thus this policy allows Hanoi to encourage China to take a softer line on the South China Sea issue while simultaneously increasing Vietnam’s value as a regional partner for the US.

The key take-away here is that while taking sides is not desirable, it should never be taken off the table. The moment ASEAN locks itself into any particular position, be it pro-US, pro-China or neutral, it will put a cap on all policy flexibility and constrain its own agency. While certainty and predictability reduce the risk of miscalculations and unwanted outcomes, tying one’s own hands is not a luxury that the weak side could afford. One could argue that the most efficient deterrent in the arsenal of weak states is uncertainty. Its deterrence value is not the same as nuclear powers but it helps weak states convey the strategic signalling to potential adversaries that their actions could potentially lead to severe consequences.

The deterrent effect of this hedging position will scale up if it is adopted by many weak states together. Thus, as an institution, ASEAN needs to collectively discuss and specify in advance “red lines”, violations of which would cause the organisation to swing its weight against the offending superpower. More ambitiously, ASEAN should also discuss the measures that it would be willing to take to confront future antagonists.

Since ASEAN has always insisted on its “centrality” in matters pertaining to the region, its policymakers should also ask what is the most effective way to achieve this goal.

To answer this question, it is worth noting that great powers can only achieve hegemony through a combination of raw hard power and legitimacy. In his masterpiece *Diplomacy* (1994), Henry Kissinger makes a reasonable claim that “power without legitimacy tempts tests of strength; legitimacy without power tempts empty posturing.” Given that both the US and China are struggling for supremacy in Southeast Asia, it is clear that to realise this goal, they need much more than raw power, which both have in abundance.

The most valuable “commodity” that ASEAN can provide to either superpower is a sense of legitimacy, which means that such a superpower’s dominance is considered to be benevolent by the people in this region and ASEAN’s support for the superpower is not predicated on fear. In other words, the goal is to replicate the sense of legitimacy similar to what the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) can provide for the use of force, in this particular region. However, to achieve this goal, it is likely that ASEAN would have to undergo significant institutional reforms, starting with the replacement of decision-making by consensus with some form of qualified majority voting. Some states would be rightly concerned that they will constantly find themselves in the minority in ASEAN but such an outcome is not inevitable. It is still possible for ASEAN member states to negotiate a voting procedure that takes into account the interests of those holding minority views without paralysing the entire grouping.

Consequently, member states whose vital national interests are undermined by ASEAN’s current institutional paralysis should be willing to play brinkmanship with ASEAN. Being a member of ASEAN is generally beneficial to its member states, but when their key interests are no longer served by participating in the organisation, they should not shy from undertaking a serious review of the costs and benefits of continuing to be part of ASEAN. At least the willingness to think about such dramatic steps should shake ASEAN out of its usual inertia and push ASEAN on the right path to reform. Only by doing so would it be able to manage effectively the sharpening rivalry between the US and China.

**Mr. Ngo Di Lan (Lan D. Ngo)** is currently a Ph.D. candidate in International Relations at Brandeis University. His research focuses on how states respond to territorial *faits accomplis*.



# Chinese Influence in ASEAN is Overrated

**Sovinda Po** offers a Cambodian perspective on China's influence in Southeast Asia and what it means for ASEAN unity.

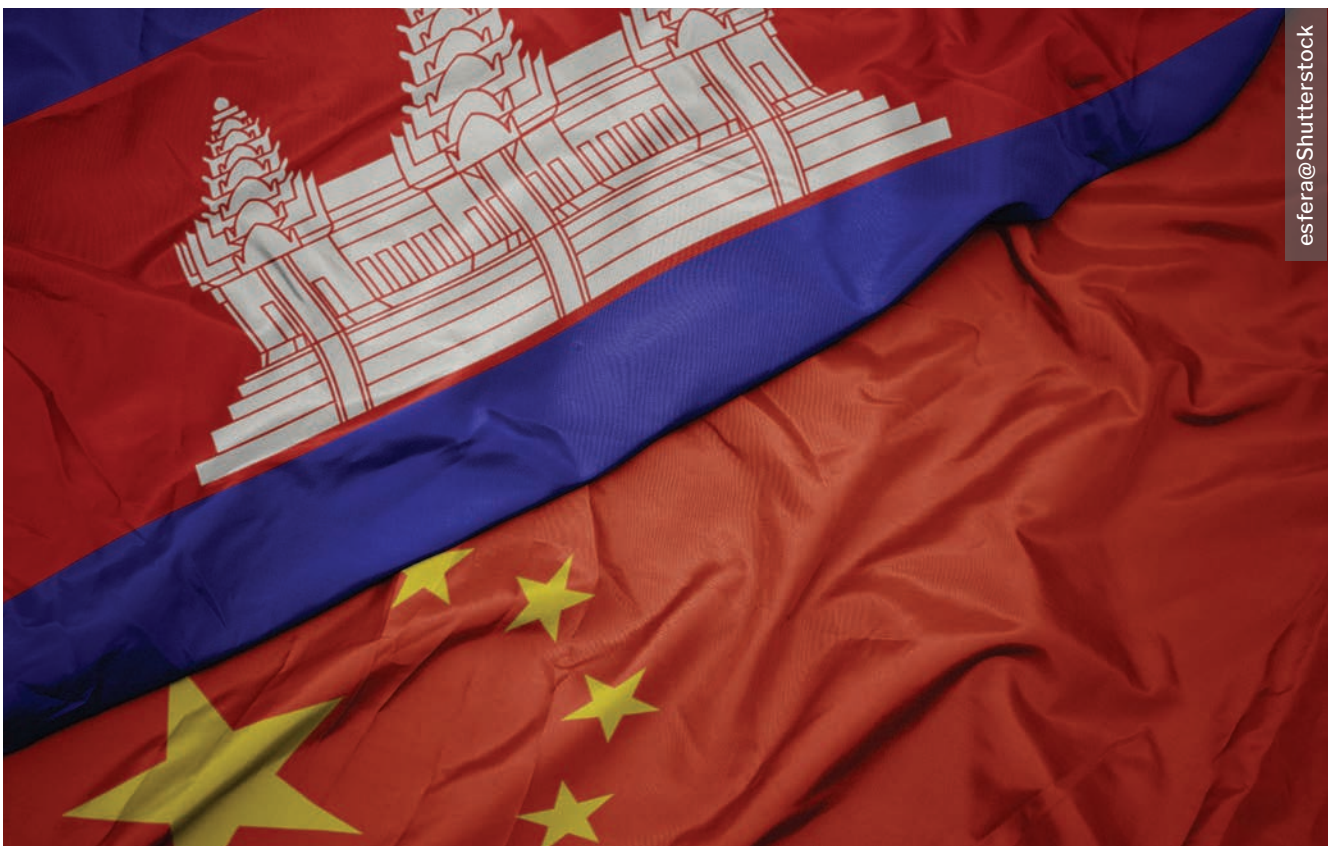
**T**he weight of China's economic gravity is strong and growing in Southeast Asia. In 2020, ASEAN-China trade volume reached an all-time high as ASEAN became China's largest trading partner. Chinese investments continue to flow into the region in large numbers. With increased and intense economic interactions, there is a widespread perception that ASEAN economies depend heavily on China. Such a statement explains only part of the story.

ASEAN countries do depend on China for investment and trade but this dependency is not absolute. Dependency implies that these countries rely on China for certain supplies and the absence of such supplies from China creates risks for these countries. Such supplies may include financial capital, technology acumen and strategic raw materials. However, anticipated risks can be mitigated by diversifying the sources of economic growth through other major economic partners. The US, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the EU, and potentially India, have and will continue to provide credible alternatives to the Chinese supplies.

Arguably, China also depends on Southeast Asia for its economic prosperity, perhaps more so than most

people would think. Given the ongoing trade tensions between China and the US, the ASEAN market is more crucial than ever before. As ASEAN countries buy more Chinese goods, China can afford to rely less on the US market and become less exposed to US punitive trade measures. From an investment perspective, since most ASEAN countries, especially least developed economies like Cambodia and Laos, enjoy trade preferences from the EU and the US, Chinese export-oriented investments in ASEAN are able to export directly from these countries to the US and the EU at low or no tariffs. In this sense, Chinese investments in the region benefit ASEAN countries as much as they do Chinese businesses.

Foreign trade and overseas investments continue to be key engines of China's economic growth even as the Chinese leadership has shifted greater focus to its huge domestic market. For all its size and might, China's economic punishment on other countries, like what it has done to Australia since last year, also comes at its own expense. As many developed countries have adopted a more cautious and competitive approach towards China in both economic and security domains, Beijing should think twice before it employs any heavy-handed approach in settling its disagreements or disputes with



some ASEAN member states. Doing so will undermine China's own economic growth which has been the bedrock of the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy at home.

Another common perception is that ASEAN is becoming more divided as China casts a larger shadow over the region. The perception is partly true, but it obscures the very resilience of ASEAN and the determination of its member states to leverage ASEAN to keep their autonomy amid intense major power rivalries. The ASEAN community-building project continues to progress across the three political-security, economic and socio-cultural pillars. For diversification purpose, ASEAN has also signed and upgraded free trade agreements with other key economic partners apart from China. The recent conclusion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is a strong testament to ASEAN's initiative and centrality by bringing China, Japan and the ROK, together with Australia and New Zealand, in a single mega free trade agreement.

Much criticism about ASEAN disunity resides in the fact that ASEAN as a whole does not stand up against China on the South China Sea (SCS) disputes. This criticism is misleading because ASEAN prefers a dialogue-based solution and avoids confrontation which would only fuel anger and narrow down the opportunities to resolve disputes peacefully. The process of negotiating a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC) is under way. It remains unclear at this stage whether the future COC would be successful in managing the disputes at the SCS. But it is also premature to presume that ASEAN's efforts in this respect have been a failure. The absence of a full-scale gunshot thus far in the SCS indicates a certain degree of rules and norms acceptance by China and other claimant states, which provides positive signs towards an amicable solution to the problem.

Cambodia is often blamed for being a troublemaker and for breaking up ASEAN unity on the SCS issue, which has created a lot of internal anxiety and frustration within the grouping. The failure to issue the joint communiqué at the annual ASEAN foreign ministers meeting under Cambodia's chairmanship in 2012 remains a point of reference for those who claim that Cambodia is a proxy of China.

The fact is that Cambodia has consistently expressed its preference that the disputes be resolved bilaterally between the claimant states and advocated a non-confrontational approach to the SCS issue. Cambodia's foreign policy behaviours are anchored in Cambodia's perception and pursuit of its own national interests. In tilting towards China, Cambodia hopes to achieve economic gains, security assistance and regime stability. As Cambodia's largest aid donor, trading partner and foreign investor, China's economic influence in Cambodia is unmatched by ASEAN or any other major power. China has also provided a substantial amount of military assistance to the Royal Cambodian Armed



Forces (RCAF). Most importantly, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen has found in Beijing a reliable source of support for his pursuit of political power by sustaining his ruling regime.

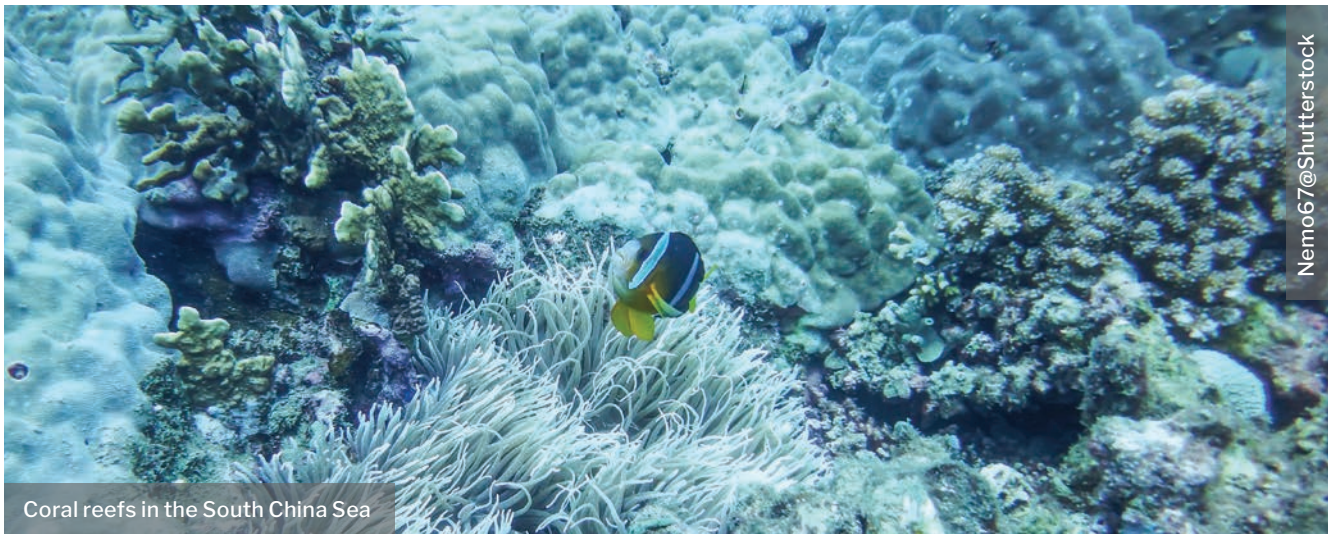
Cambodia is often criticised for being selfish to embrace China at the expense of ASEAN. But a sovereign political entity like Cambodia has legitimate rights to pursue its best national interest. The same can be said about some ASEAN members that have encouraged the US to play a dominant security role in the region to check Chinese power even as that could be seen as a potential force for disability by others. A US-China clash in the SCS will create chaos and instability in the region, which would be damaging to the pursuit of economic growth and development by ASEAN countries.

Rather than engaging in the blame game, it would be more helpful to address this critical question: What more can be done to help the least developed ASEAN countries to rely less on China? Other major powers and more developed ASEAN members like Singapore and Malaysia should consider investing more in Cambodia and Laos, especially in areas such as agriculture and manufacturing. Infrastructure development is fundamental to economic growth and therefore the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 should be leveraged to facilitate less developed ASEAN countries in this regard. More full scholarships should also be offered to students in these countries that do not have advanced education systems. Economic prosperity and strong human capital are fundamentals of a strong state that in turn will have the confidence and capacity to pursue an independent foreign policy. ASEAN will help itself by helping its members to be economically strong and intellectually capable.

**Mr. Sovinda Po** is a Senior Research Fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace and a PhD candidate in International Relations at Griffith University, Australia.

# The South China Sea: Beyond Geopolitics

**Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby** suggests shifting the focus in the South China Sea from geopolitics to protection of global commons and human security.



Coral reefs in the South China Sea

**T**erritorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS) remain one of the most pressing security issues in Southeast Asia and the larger Indo-Pacific. Adding to the mix is the sharpening US-China rivalry since the SCS has emerged as an arena of their geopolitical contest. The triangular relationships between Southeast Asian claimant states, China and the US have therefore been confounded and complicated by the SCS disputes. In the case of the Philippines, despite the 2016 arbitral tribunal's award in its favour, the incumbent Duterte Administration has pursued a "pivot to China" policy, which undermines its alliance with Washington. The SCS issue is also often brought up as a showcase of ASEAN's disunity in the face of a powerful, assertive China. The unfolding security dilemma in the SCS and the current deadlock in the negotiations on a Code of Conduct (COC) are both manifestations and outcomes of the securitisation of the SCS, which is predicated on these countries' commitment to state-centrality and territoriality.

The securitisation approach has narrowed down the possible pathways towards a sustainable and effective regional framework to the SCS issue. Going forward, a way out of this dilemma is to desecuritize the contested waters. To desecuritize means to move an issue from the emergency realm back to normal politics where it can be subject to public debate and discussion. Desecuritising the SCS requires that the arbitrary distinction between 'us' and 'them' be dissolved. There are two ways to do this.

First, instead of anchoring the issue on territoriality and ownership, the focus can be shifted to the global commons and the blue economy, both of which are crucial to maritime safety and security in the SCS. A robust blue economy enables the sustainable development of coastal economies, engenders food and energy security, and supports international trade by way of investing in industries that are anchored in sustainable coastal tourism, improving port infrastructure and ensuring managed and regulated fisheries. In contrast, unilateral and state-based solutions to these disputes have resulted in the over-exploitation of marine fisheries resources, exacerbation of climate change impact, and an increase in maritime criminal activities like illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

In this regard, coastal welfare is an important function of the global commons and the blue economy. Studies have proven that many of the illicit maritime activities originate from economic insecurity onshore. Conditions onshore, such as weak governance, poor rule of law and the proliferation of black-market economies can easily spill over to the maritime domain where both foreign and local illicit networks flourish. Improved maritime governance in, for instance, fisheries can preclude coastal populations from turning to criminal networks and exploiting maritime resources through illegal means. The creation of marine protected areas can aid in the conservation of fragile marine ecosystems, thereby boosting fish stocks and improving local livelihoods and food security. State-based initiatives should be

synergised with those from the private sector and non-state actors, especially in the fishery industries and in investments on new facilities and technologies.

Second, the SCS issue can be desecuritized by bringing it to the level of human security. At the heart of this largely state-based issue is, after all, its effects on the everyday lived experiences of people. The June 2019 sinking of the Filipino fishing boat *Gem-ver* by a Chinese ship is a good example of how the SCS issue can be seen from the lens of human security. Poor maritime governance in the contested waters can likewise result in an increase in transnational crimes including piracy incidents, armed robbery at sea, human smuggling, trafficking, slavery and illicit trade of drugs, wildlife, and other contraband items. Practitioners and scholars of security understand the gravity and significance of artificial islands, but if this is framed as an issue of fishing rights and access to food, if freedom of navigation is framed as ease of doing business, if the COC is framed as mechanisms in response to the activities of criminal networks, then the issue is no longer just a state issue but a human security issue.

The shift of focus on the SCS disputes from geopolitics to the global commons and human security largely depends on effective cooperation among states in multilateral settings. This is indeed the unfortunate irony of regional and international affairs: While the limits of a state-based perspective are duly recognised, we cannot escape the centrality of the state at the end of the day. Nowhere is this more apparent than in ASEAN, an organisation built on the continuing relevance of sovereignty and territoriality.

To its credit, ASEAN has developed some initiatives aimed at improving cooperation on marine environment under the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025. The priority areas identified in the Blueprint's strategic plan include nature conservation and biodiversity, coastal and marine environment, water resources management, environmentally sustainable cities, climate change, chemicals and waste, and environmental education and sustainable consumption and production. In particular, the ASEAN Working Group on Coastal and Marine Environment is the region's coordinating body of initiatives on sustainable marine

resource management. Likewise, ASEAN has developed some initiatives on maritime domain awareness, which can contribute to better maritime governance and enforcement. For instance, the Philippines has initiated the establishment of the ASEAN Coastguard Forum to facilitate exchange of best practices and capacity building among regional coast guards and maritime law enforcement agencies. In 2017, the first ASEAN Multilateral Naval Exercise was held in Thailand to improve operational capacity and interoperability amongst its members. Efforts like these are welcome initiatives because they are critical to building trust and capacity among the member states on practical maritime issues.

Of course, there is more that ASEAN can and should do to go beyond the geopolitical anchors of the SCS disputes. In terms of its internal structures, ASEAN should streamline the many overlapping agencies and groups working on maritime issues. It should also ensure that its activities and mechanisms contribute to enhancing maritime security on the ground. In addition, minilateral arrangements such as the Malacca Straits Patrol undertaken by Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, as well as the Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines (Indomalphi) Maritime Patrol, should be seen as complementary to and not competing with (or displacing) ASEAN-led mechanisms.

Finally, the importance of people-to-people linkages cannot be overstated, which can be honed and strengthened via various ASEAN platforms for information exchange, dialogue, and Track 1.5 and Track 2 initiatives. In the Philippines, a new think-tank called the Foundation for the National Interest (FNI) recently held the Kwentong Mandaragat webinar series that brought together members of the national and regional strategic community to discuss human security issues arising from the maritime domain. As we realise how the SCS disputes are inextricably linked to issues beyond the purview of geopolitics, the more we should tap and leverage actors and actions beyond the usual cast of characters of international relations.

**Dr. Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby** is Associate Professor of International Studies at De La Salle University in Manila.



Fishermen houses in Hainan Island, China in the South China Sea

# YOUNG MOVERS & SHAKERS @ ASEAN COMMUNITY

ASEANFocus spotlights innovators, change-makers and leaders from across the region working to improve the lives of many in the ASEAN Community and beyond.

Trang Nguyen

Founder and CEO, WildAct



*“I want to tell children and parents that girls can have great dreams to become scientists, astronauts, engineers, math professors, wildlife conservationists, and historical figures. And they have the power to make their dreams come true.” (credit: [www.nhandan.org.vn](http://www.nhandan.org.vn))*

After watching how animal body parts were harvested, Trang Nguyen embarked on her life path of wildlife conservation in her teenage years. She founded the Vietnam-based NGO WildAct, a team of young women below 30 years old, aiming to tackle illegal wildlife trade by bridging the knowledge gap on the poaching crisis of large mammals between ‘source’ African countries and the ‘end-use markets’ of Asia. WildAct raises awareness on conservation issues through educational programs with collaborating universities and hospitals, shedding light on misperceptions about the efficacy of wild animals such as rhino horns in traditional medicine. Her NGO also works with the police and anti-poaching authorities in Africa and Asia to monitor illegal wildlife trade. Her book titled “Back to the Wilderness” was published in 2018 while a series of picture books on wildlife conservation are upcoming. Trang Nguyen received the Future for Nature Award 2018 and was in the BBC list of 100 most inspiring and influential women in 2019 as well as the Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia 2020 list in the Social Entrepreneurs category.

Louise Mabulo

Founder, The Cacao Project



*“What if we harness the power of our forests and landscapes to rethink the way we produce our food? The Cacao Project is on a mission to position our farmers for sustainable success.”*

Louise Mabulo founded The Cacao Project to revive barren lands and promote agriculture as a dignified trade after witnessing the devastation wrought by yearly typhoons on farmland in the Philippines. Her organisation focuses on promoting reforestation, fair trade and introducing disaster-resilient and profitable crops and agricultural methods. She is also an agriculture advocate, working to increase youth interest in agriculture and overturn the stigma of farming. For her tireless efforts at not only helping her disaster-stricken community but also future-proofing a key industry in the region, Louise was the regional winner (Asia and the Pacific) of the Young Champion of the Earth 2019 Award by the United Nations Environment Programme and the 2018 Outstanding Young Farmer of the Philippines Award. In 2020, Louise was named in the Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia 2020 list in the Social Entrepreneurs category.



**Daroath Phav**

Former Executive Director, WaterSHED;  
Board Member, WaterSHED Ventures



*“Social businesses are much more powerful when we invest in the local system around them. My wish for Cambodia is for market actors to continue to serve customers with products that make their lives better and healthier, and that these efforts are part of stronger local systems.”*

Daroath Phav and his team at WaterSHED, a local Cambodian NGO focused on building high-quality and affordable sanitation and hygiene products, helped to bring affordable toilet systems to many households by raising sanitation awareness and building a dynamic rural market based on increasing supply and demand. More than 150,000 toilets were sold nationwide, generating more than USD6 million for local businesses and helping to accelerate rural sanitation coverage in Cambodia from 4% in 2000 to 56% in 2017. By 2017, the WaterSHED’s Hands-Off approach to sanitation had expanded across eight provinces in Cambodia. Daroath Phav was selected as a top social entrepreneur in the Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia 2017 list. Currently on the board of WaterSHED Ventures, Daroath Phav continues to leverage social entrepreneurship to help his homeland.

**Manothis Siripaphanh**

Managing Director, NAREE



*“I want NAREE to add value to the textile industry and also promote Lao culture.”*  
(credit: [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org))

Wishing to embed the value of tradition alongside social development, Manothis Siripaphanh launched NAREE in 2015, the first handbag brand in Laos which has since become very popular among Lao women and aims to reach the wider regional market in the near future. Her products are primarily made from local silk, cotton and fabrics sourced from silk-weaving artisans in local remote villages. Such a blend of traditional culture and social entrepreneurship has given NAREE handbags a unique identity. Manothis Siripaphanh’s business model has also inspired many young local businesspeople to come up with their own initiatives and venture into local and regional markets. Manothis Siripaphanh was one of the ASEAN Youth Awardees in 2017 and Outstanding ASEAN Women Entrepreneurs Awardees of the ASEAN Women Entrepreneurs Network (AWEN Award) in 2018.

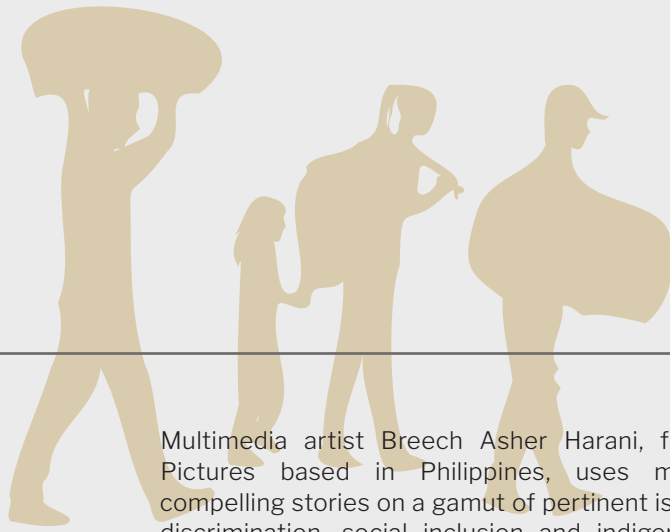
**Melati Wijsen**

Co-founder, Bye Bye Plastic Bags



*“We truly believe that the potential of Bali and Indonesia to act as a showcase for sustainability has never been as ready as it is today. More than 50% of the population are below 30 years old! Think of the innovative solutions and systems we could help accelerate. The passion and excitement are there! Now we need leadership and we know that our generation can help shape what we are missing.”*

Growing up in Bali, Melati Wijsen and Isabel Wijsen saw plastic bags strewn on their childhood beach and daily garbage pile up across the island. In 2013, a school lesson on influential world leaders inspired the two sisters, then 12 and 10 years old, into environmental action. That year, they launched their Bye Bye Plastic Bags campaign that called for an institutional ban on single-use plastics, mobilised young people for beach clean-ups and persuaded shop-owners to go plastic-free. To their delight, Bali’s ban on single-use plastic bags came into effect in 2019. Bye Bye Plastic Bags today is one of the largest youth-led NGOs in Indonesia with a global reach of 50 teams in 30 countries. In 2020, Melati and Isabel Wijsen launched YOUTHTOPIA, a youth empowering ecosystem where frontline young change-makers help each other create advocacy content. Numerous honours have been awarded to the two sisters, including the Time Magazine’s Most Influential Teens, CNN’s Young Wonders in 2018, the Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia 2020 list, and Earth Prize 2020.



**Breech Asher Harani**

**Founder, Alexandrite Pictures**



*“Visual storytelling is such a powerful tool to educate, inform and spark discourse on our regional cultures and social problems. By creating a platform for creativity to thrive and forming factual but powerful narratives, we hope to capture young people’s attention and inspire them to take action to make ASEAN a better place to live in.”*

Multimedia artist Breech Asher Harani, founder of Alexandrite Pictures based in Philippines, uses multimedia to narrate compelling stories on a gamut of pertinent issues such as migration, discrimination, social inclusion and indigenous cultures. He has been appointed by the United Nations Alliance for Civilization as an inter-cultural leader for his audio-visual works that address cross-cultural tensions and social problems in Southeast Asia. His internationally acclaimed short feature “Next to Me” touches on the displacement and discrimination faced by a young Muslim girl from Marawi in her new non-Muslim school in Mindanao after being forced to flee her hometown during the 2017 Battle of Marawi. The feature brought him the JCS International Young Creatives Award Winner 2019 by the International Academy of Television Arts & Sciences. He was recognised in the Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia 2020 list as the only Filipino in the Arts category.

**Chit Aein Thu**

**Founder and Managing Director, CCEducare**



*“Digital literacy has become a key expertise in accessing information and learning competent skills not just in Myanmar, but worldwide.”*

To enable Myanmar students’ access to equal education opportunities, Chit Aein Thu, the Founder and Managing Director of CCEducare, has been working to raise digital literacy among students and keep them continually engaged through digital courses and educational videos on computers and mobile devices. CCEducare provides innovative EdTech solutions to bolster digital education through learning management systems, digital content creation and digital curriculum designing. CCEducare has also organised digital literacy workshops for more than 3,000 participants from vulnerable youth communities and women in businesses across Myanmar, and hopes to expand its social outreach at the ASEAN level through collaboration with regional partners. CCEducare has won numerous international awards including the Mekong Innovative Award 2017 and the Seeds for the Future grant under the US-sponsored Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) in 2018. Chit Aein Thu won the Special Impact Award at the Women’s Forum Asia 2019 and was the winner of the Women of the Future Southeast Asia Awards 2020 in the Social Entrepreneur category.



## Adrian Ang

Co-founder and CEO,  
AEvice Health



*“I would strongly encourage students to join or create a start-up during their undergraduate days to gain exposure in entrepreneurship, especially when their opportunity costs are significantly lower now than later.”*  
(credit: [www.ntu.edu.sg](http://www.ntu.edu.sg))

An exchange programme in Sweden during his second year at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University (NTU) deeply inspired Adrian Ang to embark on innovative entrepreneurship. He joined his mentor in 2016 to kick-start a biomedical start-up AEvice Health in Singapore. The company patented BioAsthma, a respiratory monitoring wearable device that helps monitor children’s asthma conditions and sends real-time alerts when abnormalities are detected. AEvice Health then developed AireSone, a smart wearable device for children that uses algorithms to record and analyse asthma symptoms. The device helps monitor an individual’s respiratory rate, heart rate and sleep patterns remotely and continuously in real-time. AEvice Health expects their product to become the new standard of asthma control, and is working to bring the device to patients with chronic respiratory diseases in other regions. For his meaningful solution to help solve real problems for people with respiratory issues, Adrian Ang was recognised in the Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia 2018 list in the Healthcare and Science category.

## Nophol Techaphangam

Founder and CEO, Norrnorn



*“We hope to provide hospitality businesses in ASEAN with affordable access to high quality mattresses through our subscription platform while enabling them to effortlessly contribute to environmental sustainability in a financially positive way.”*

Nophol Techaphangam founded Norrnorn in 2018 as the world’s first circular economy-based mattress subscription service for hospitality businesses to reduce the environmental impact of used mattress disposal. Nophol’s start-up offers a unique cost-effective and green service: Rent brand-new, quality mattresses from less than USD2 per mattress per month through five- or ten-year subscriptions and thereafter return the used mattresses where approximately 90% of the parts would be reused and upcycled for other purposes. By eliminating upfront investment costs on mattresses for hospitality businesses and incorporating the upcycling costs and services as part of their subscription, Norrnorn provides a truly innovative and sustainable solution both commercially and environmentally. Norrnorn is operating in Southeast Asia and South Asia, and will be expanding to Europe. Norrnorn was part of the Mekong Innovative Startups in Tourism (MIST) Startup Accelerator 2018, and a Finalist of the World Tourism Forum Lucerne (WTFLL) Start-up Innovation Camp in 2020 and 2021. Nophol was recognised as one of the 100 promising individuals on Tatler Thailand’s Future List 2020, and one of the 400 leaders of tomorrow making a difference in Asia on Tatler’s Gen.T List 2020.

## Dr. Bee Lynn Chew

Senior Lecturer, Universiti  
Sains Malaysia



*“I hope to inspire the young generation in the field of modern farming, and to advocate for sustainable and responsible farming.”*

Dr. Bee Lynn Chew, Senior Lecturer and Plant Scientist at Universiti Sains Malaysia, is known for her research that involves the application of plant tissue and cell cultures for the propagation of high-value crops of figs, lemons and olives, as well as the incorporation of the Internet of Things (IoT) for better monitoring and improvement of farming practices in the region. Tapping on her research, Dr. Chew has been introducing practical and profitable agricultural technologies to local farmers. With Malaysia’s large potential in the food and agricultural market and future opportunities for economic growth and job creation in the agricultural sector, Dr. Chew hopes her research-driven cultivation methods will motivate the younger generation to embark on modern farming. Dr. Chew was recognised by the Women of the Future Awards Southeast Asia 2020 as one of the region’s emerging female leaders and change-makers in the field of Science, Technology and Digital.

# Belonging in a Cross-Cultural World



**Shoki Lin** is a young Singaporean filmmaker. His short films have connected global audiences with stories of people searching for their own belonging and identity in our diverse region. He shares with ASEANFocus his journey of filmmaking, the themes that keep him inspired and engaged, and his musings on a shared Southeast Asian identity.

**AF:** What drew you to films, particularly in the short format, as a medium of storytelling?

**LIN:** I think short films are special because they often express an idea in a very concise and precise way. I had initially thought that short films were truncated forms of feature films, but I've come to see them as their own unique medium of storytelling. I have always enjoyed working with video and I started exploring writing in university. Making short films was a natural progression for me.

**AF:** How have your own personal experiences shaped your oeuvre?

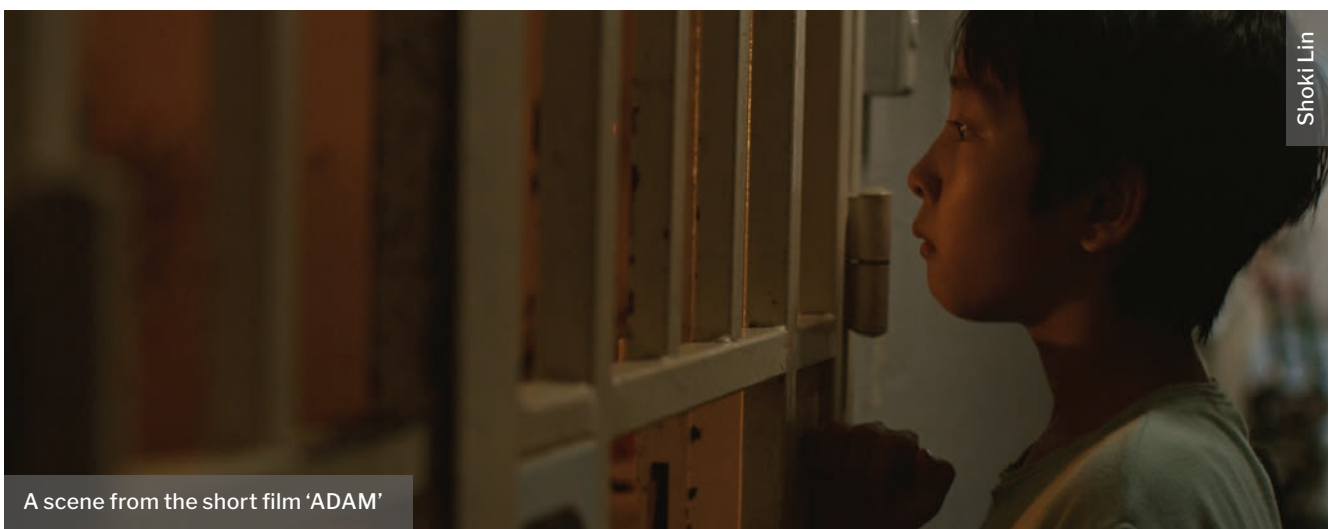
**LIN:** I think most filmmakers inevitably find themselves drawn to the themes and topics that relate to their personal experiences. For me I try to draw from my own experiences and observations about the things that happen around me. But I also try to explore characters that are removed from my own life and put myself in the shoes of these characters. I think that helps me to explore different ideas in the writing process.

**AF:** What constitutes your typical process of filmmaking, and how would you describe your filming style?

**LIN:** At the heart of any film is the writing. It is the most important part of the process and the part that I struggle the most with. It's hard to define a good story and I never can tell when a story is complete. I try my best to write stories with characters that provide an interesting perspective or to show a part of our humanity.

**AF:** Your short films 'ADAM', 'Changi' and 'Chasing Paper' explore the themes of belonging and identity that are at once universal but also intrinsically rooted in local culture and society. Why did you decide to focus on these themes?

**LIN:** Our sense of identity is usually tied to our desire to want to feel like we belong in this world. These films explore this basic desire to connect to a place or to another person. The thought of wanting to fit in and to feel like we belong is something I relate to and perhaps that is why it recurs in my features. I try to bring local contexts and ideas that can help serve the story and give the film a realistic feel. I think the stories and characters should always feel like they are part of the world they inhabit.



Shoki Lin



**AF:** *Could you tell us about your experience of having 'ADAM' chosen for the Cinéfondation Selection and screened at the 72<sup>nd</sup> Festival de Cannes in 2019?*

**LIN:** Being part of Cannes was an incredible experience. I really got to experience cinema on a different scale. Everyone lived and breathed cinema. The energy was awe-inspiring.

**AF:** *How have your films been received and reviewed by global audiences at international film festivals? Was there a difference in audience engagement internationally compared to local and regional film festivals?*

**LIN:** For local audiences, the landscape and the characters will feel familiar to them so they might experience the films differently from someone who is not familiar with Singapore. However, I think the emotions that the characters experience in the films are universal and it is nice to see people from different countries connecting with the story and feeling for the characters. I do get questions from international audiences regarding the details of the local context and it is always nice to be able to share and show a part of what the country is like.

**AF:** *What do you hope your audience will take away from viewing your works?*

**LIN:** I would not usually have a specific takeaway for any of my films. I just hope that in their experience of watching the films, they get to feel something or be able to reflect on a part of our humanity.

**AF:** *Do you think people in the region will someday go beyond the confines of their individual nationalities and ethnicities to embrace Southeast Asia as part of their home and identity?*

**LIN:** Southeast Asia consists of a diverse range of different cultures so I think it is hard to form a singular identity. That being said, the region of Southeast Asia is unlike anywhere else in the world and if we do have a collective identity, it should be one that celebrates our diversity.

**AF:** *Even if a Southeast Asian identity remains more an aspiration than a reality, is it worthwhile for ASEAN to foster such a regional identity?*

**LIN:** I think it is beneficial to foster a shared identity to create a sense of community within the region. As our cultures are so diverse, I think having such a relationship acts as a first step towards breaking the barriers between its people and allowing for greater communication and collaboration in the region.

**AF:** *There have been cross-border collaborative projects that invite Southeast Asian filmmakers to make short, narrative movies on those themes that resonate with the shared experiences of people in the region. If you were to join such a project, what themes would you possibly have in mind?*

**LIN:** I have been involved in two ASEAN collaborative initiatives: the ASEAN-ROK Film Leaders Incubator and the 18<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-Korea Future-Oriented Youth Exchange Program. Both involved collaborating with young filmmakers from ASEAN countries to create a short film. It was a great experience working with passionate young filmmakers from around the region. Filmmaking is such a collaborative effort. So it was interesting to see how everyone brought their own unique perspective to the table.

**AF:** *Are there other Southeast Asian directors or filmmakers you look up to?*

**LIN:** Apichatpong Weerasethakul is an interesting Thai filmmaker whose work has always intrigued me. His films capture the transcendental and I think it takes someone with masterful control of the form to be able to create such works.



A scene from the short film 'Chasing Paper'



Rifdi Bin Rosly

Film crew discussing a scene layout in the short film 'ADAM'

**AF:** What are your hopes for the film industry in Singapore as well as in Southeast Asia?

**LIN:** I certainly hope to see more films being produced in Singapore and around the region. It would be great if 'Southeast Asian cinema' would be as internationally ubiquitous as, say, Korean cinema.

**AF:** Why do you think Southeast Asian cinema has not gotten as much global recognition as our East or South Asian counterparts?

**LIN:** I think it takes time for the works of Southeast Asian filmmakers to get into the appeal of broader audiences. I do, however, see a lot of bold and interesting works coming from filmmakers around the region. So it would only be a matter of time that Southeast Asian cinema will be more recognised internationally.

**AF:** In your opinion, what more can ASEAN or national governments do to support and promote its homegrown films and talents?

**LIN:** I think promoting the media and supporting the film industry are very important for the growth of the industry, especially since the industry is still young. Initiatives like film production grants and funding are great ways to stimulate the industry and make it easier for directors to realise their films.

**AF:** Looking towards future horizons, what will your next project be about?

**LIN:** I am still in the process of exploring ideas. Writing is a process that I have gotten okay to not try to rush through and allow myself the time to let the ideas develop.

**AF:** How would you see yourself evolve as a filmmaker in the next ten years?

**LIN:** I do not have a specific path that I envision myself going down. I could not have planned for a lot that has happened in my filmmaking journey. Thus looking down the road, I am open to where things will take me. I'll just have to remember not to lose myself in the process and to make the films that I truly care for.

**AF:** What advice would you give to young Southeast Asians considering pursuing filmmaking or looking to dip their toes in the region's film industry?

**LIN:** I think it is important to understand the motivations behind the choice to pursue filmmaking and to use that as a guiding principle as they embark on their journey.

I am sure that there are many great stories to be told by young Southeast Asian filmmakers and I look forward to seeing the works that come out of this region.

**Mr. Shoki Lin** is a director, writer and cinematographer based in Singapore. He studied Digital Filmmaking at the School of Art, Design and Media at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. His thesis short film 'ADAM' was part of the Cinéfondation Selection at the 72<sup>nd</sup> Festival de Cannes in 2019. His previous works include 'Chasing Paper' which was an entry at the 2018 Busan International Film Festival and 'Changj' which won best picture at the 2017 National Youth Film Awards.



Rifdi Bin Rosly

Director Shoki Lin speaks to lead actors of the short film 'ADAM' between takes on the script

# Subterranean Secrets of Southeast Asia

Neo Guo Wei Kevin explores the secrets hidden within the deepest reaches of Southeast Asia.

In a world where modernity has encroached on much of the terrestrial landscape, it is rare to find oneself stunned into silence beholding the still hidden beauty of nature. This was probably how Hồ Khanh, a local logger in Vietnam, felt when he stumbled upon the hitherto undiscovered splendour of Sơn Đoòng Cave in 1991. When he came across the opening of the cave, it had cloud-like condensation and the flowing sound of a river emerging from it. Sơn Đoòng was later recognised as the largest known cave in the world.

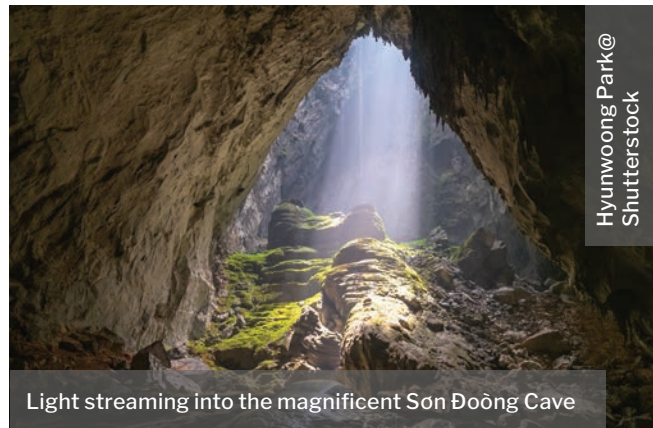
Many travel bloggers have waxed lyrical on the natural wonders of Southeast Asia – its pristine white sand beaches, lush tropical rainforests and majestic mountain peaks. However, as any well-travelled backpacker roaming the hills and villages in Southeast Asia will attest to, there is much more to this region and its people than meets the eye. Hidden below the surface are caves and grottos that have formed below the Earth since time immemorial.

The region's tropical climate and geological conditions set the ideal stage for the languid development of its intricate network of underground caverns over millennia. Extensive areas of Southeast Asia sit atop unique limestone formations dating back to more than 400 million years ago. High levels of rainfall in the tropical region over the years ate away at these limestone structures to chisel spectacular examples of Mother Nature's subterranean labyrinths.

For the average city dweller, deluged by concrete jungles and teeming masses of humanity, caves offer a glimpse

of a pristine, preserved past where time stood still and an otherworldly place where the beauty and wonder of Mother Nature remain relatively untouched. Sơn Đoòng Cave in Vietnam's UNESCO World Heritage Site of Phong Nha-Kẻ Bàng National Park, in particular, is so gargantuan that it can fit a 40-storey high skyscraper. The cave's unique geological structure allows sunlight to stream in, developing its own weather system, an extensive underground river network and a virgin jungle habitat beneath the Earth's surface. With its self-contained underground ecosystem, it is able to support endemic flora and fauna specific to the locale.

Over in East Malaysia, hidden beneath the renowned pin-like limestone karst pinnacles of Gunung Mulu National Park are extensive cave networks which are even more spectacular and impressive. These caves are carved out of the limestone formation by the extensive rainfall that



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Light streaming into the magnificent Sơn Đoòng Cave



Wesley de Ridder@Flickr

Camping inside Hang Ến (Swallow Cave) in Vietnam's Phong Nha-Kẻ Bàng National Park



Batu Caves in Malaysia

minshee93@Pixabay

the tropical region receives annually. Among the caves, Sarawak Chamber holds the distinction of being the largest known natural cave chamber in the world by area. Sarawak Chamber is so big that up to 40 Boeing-747 jumbo jets can comfortably fit in it.

Caves are able to offer something for everyone. Hikers can seek cool refuge on a hot summer day or warm shelter during cold winter nights. Tourists and cave explorers have spent hours poring over spectacular cave deposits of stalagmites (icicle-shaped formations of precipitate minerals from water dripping through the cave ceiling) and stalactites (upward-growing mineral deposits from water dripping onto the cave floor). Adventure-seekers have taken to the sport of spelunking or caving, exploring every facet of the cavern by climbing and crawling through tight passages, zip-lining and rappelling down between different cave levels and even diving underwater in the caves.

For the surrounding communities, caves offer an important source of natural resources for their daily

activities. Locals living in the vicinity of Malaysia's Gunung Mulu National Park traditionally head to its many caves to harvest bat and swiftlet droppings (also known as guano) for use as fertilizer. Nests made by swiftlets from their saliva perched precariously on cave walls are much sought after as an ingredient for the highly prized bird's nest soup. Among the park's famed caves, Gua Rusa (Deer Cave) has one of the largest cave passages in the world (at over 2 kilometres in length and 174 metres high). The cave is a significant source of guano with its impenetrable colony of over 3 million bats clinging to its ceiling.

On a more mystical level, caves have long been intertwined with local religious traditions and spiritual practices in Southeast Asia. The isolation and solitude provided by caves provide ideal sanctuaries for meditation and reflection for the adherents of many faiths practised in the region. Southeast Asian countries with majority Buddhist societies stand out in their veritable trove of cave temples and shrines that run the gamut of size and grandeur. The Shwe U Min Natural Cave Pagoda of Pindaya in Myanmar's Shan State is one of the most revered Buddhist pilgrimage sites in the country. This labyrinth of twisting natural caves and tunnels holds over 8000 Buddha statues, reflecting the devotees' desire to achieve Nirvana (or enlightenment) in exchange for their merit-making

The sanctity of caves has also imprinted itself on Hindu devotees. Batu Caves, lying on the outskirts of Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur, holds great religious significance among Hindus worldwide, as its entrance resembles a vel, which is a spear closely associated with Lord Murugan. It is today an important site for the annual Thaipusam festival in Malaysia. During Thaipusam, devotees bearing a kavadi, a carrier with offerings for worship supported by vel-shaped piercings through their bodies, will take part in a procession from a Hindu temple in the city to the caves. They will mark the end of the procession by climbing 272 steep steps up to the cave for worship.



Peter Garnhum@Flickr

Meeting room in Laos' Vieng Xai cave



Throughout history, caves offer much-needed shelter for those seeking refuge from the carnage of war and conflict. In Laos' Vieng Xai district, an entire network of caves was turned into an underground city where the Communist Pathet Lao leadership and their followers lived for close to ten years from 1964 to 1973 during the Indochina war. An intricate network of subterranean military barracks, schools, hospitals, shops and even theatres were built to house around 23,000 people who lived there during the period. In Vietnam's Quảng Bình province, also known as the Kingdom of Caves for its large number of caverns, Võ Nguyên Giáp Cave served as an important hideout for its namesake, the legendary military leader who led the Vietnam People's Army to victory against the French and the Americans.

Unfortunately, the rapid rate of development in Southeast Asia today is putting caves and their hinterland under increasing pressure. There is increased demand for the resources that can be extracted from the caves and their surroundings. The quarrying of limestone, which forms the feedstock of cement production, has already led to the destruction of numerous caves. Urban sprawl has encroached upon the catchment area of cave systems, polluting ground water and affecting the delicate ecosystem in the caves. Scientists postulate that the increase in human encroachment on natural ecosystems may lead to the emergence of more zoonotic diseases similar to COVID-19.

An increase in tourism to the caves has also brought about negative impacts. Batu Caves is a case in point. Originally located in the heart of a rainforest, extensive urbanisation in its surrounding areas and a direct train connection to the city centre of Kuala Lumpur have made Batu Caves an easily accessible tourist spot. Millions of religious devotees as well as leisure travellers descend on the cultural site annually, and a variety of tourist-oriented activities such as rock-climbing, spelunking and 'flora and fauna' trails have sprouted in their wake. These

commercialised activities are at odds with the sacrosanct nature of the cave shrine, and have impacted the unique and fragile cave ecosystem. Endemic species such as the Batu Caves trapdoor spider are under threat and 'alien' species have been introduced through visitors' footwear and clothing.

This difficult trade-off between reaping the economic gains of tourism and upsetting the caves' cultural value and delicate ecosystems is the conundrum that all cave management groups face. The recently discovered Sơn Đoòng Cave is not immune to this, with controversial proposals of a cable car development project raising competing arguments of economic gains for a low-income province against concerns over environmental degradation.

ASEAN has come up with various initiatives to protect the region's natural biodiversity, such as the ASEAN Working Group on Nature Conservation and Biodiversity and the ASEAN Heritage Park Programme. However, the sustainability of many natural habitats remains precarious and a balance has to be struck with continued development in the region. With experts estimating that less than half of the caves in Southeast Asia have been fully explored, it is imperative to preserve and conserve remaining natural habitats lest we unwittingly destroy any of the subterranean wonders yet to be discovered.

The famed environmentalist Aldo Leopold once said, "Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land." Indeed, caves have given so much to the people of Southeast Asia: adventure and refuge, resources and traditions, pride and reputation. It is time that we appreciate their contribution, protect and treasure them so that future generations still have the chance to bask in the beauty that lies beneath our region.

**Mr. Neo Guo Wei Kevin** is Research Assistant at the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.



Gurazuru@Wikimedia Commons

Limestone karst Pinnacles of Gunung Mulu in Malaysia's Gunung Mulu National Park

# #LeaveNoOneBehind

**Ankush Wagle** cheers on youth volunteerism that brings hope and healing to the region in the times of pandemic.

**M**ore than a year after it became a global health crisis, the end of the COVID-19 pandemic appears closer than ever. With lifesaving vaccines finally making their way from laboratories to hospitals and clinics across the world, there is perhaps some light at the end of the tunnel. Amidst the chaos and devastation brought on by the pandemic, the past year has also seen people get together in a show of global solidarity like never before. Stories of humanity and hope emerged as individuals and communities rallied to support those most affected. In Southeast Asia, youth, in particular have stepped up as volunteers for those in need. Their efforts underline how compassionate young people can be agents of social change in the post-pandemic world.

The United Nations (UN) classifies youth as being between 15 to 24 years of age. By this definition, the youth population of the five geographically largest Southeast Asian countries, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam – is well over 100 million. Much has already been written about the massive potential of this ‘demographic dividend’ and the need to harness it. However, youth remain among the most vulnerable groups in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. COVID-19 has severely magnified and entrenched these vulnerabilities. The International Labour Organisation’s Global Survey on Youth and COVID-19 indicates that the pandemic’s impact on youth is “systematic, deep and disproportionate”. From unemployment and economic marginalisation to mental health problems and disruptions in access to education, youth in Southeast Asia are facing serious challenges in both the short and long terms.

Despite facing such bleak prospects, Southeast Asian youth have shown remarkable resilience in not only coping with the pandemic but also helping others in their communities and countries. Volunteerism has ranged from local grassroots initiatives focusing on specific groups to national-level movements. Many have



A Happy Bank youth volunteer team delivering food bags for refugee families in Selayang, Kuala Lumpur

effectively leveraged social media for activities such as fundraising and building awareness of health and safety measures in local contexts. In Indonesia’s Jambi province, for example, the Gerakan Pesantren Sehat (healthy boarding school movement) used the slogan #PesantrenBebasCorona (corona-free boarding school) as part of its efforts to educate Islamic boarding school students to prevent the spread of the virus. In North Sumatra province, three youth in the capital city of Medan initiated the #DiRumahAja (Stay At Home) campaign to raise awareness of physical distancing and the need to stay at home in line with the local government’s instructions. The campaign also worked with local businesses affected by the pandemic to create and sell products such as custom captioned shirts, directing the money from sales to help economically affected citizens.

At the national level, youth organisations have mobilised their volunteers for action. Happy Bank, a Malaysian youth platform, has engaged in ground-up activities such as providing breakfast for the homeless, volunteering at single mothers’ homes, visiting paediatric wards and blood donation drives. During Malaysia’s Movement Control Order (MCO) in mid-2020, which severely restricted people’s mobility, Happy Bank marshalled its volunteer network to deliver food to thousands of vulnerable families and individuals, including refugees. It trained volunteers to operate remote call centres to verify information on affected families and individuals and put in place standard operating procedures for food delivery. It also collaborated with various other organisations on projects such as providing tablets to school children for online learning and cash handouts to university students. As with #DiRumahAja, Happy Bank too actively used social media (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) to raise funds for affected citizens.



Gerakan Pesantren Sehat



@Walid Dalimunthe

#DiRumahAja volunteers serving the community in Medan

A common thread among these volunteer projects is the youth's focus on assisting the most marginalised and vulnerable in their communities. In Bacuag, a town in Surigao del Norte province of the Philippines, a group of volunteering youth launched the Mobile Botika sa Barangay (Mobile Pharmacy in Barangay) project to help buy medicines, hygiene kits and other essential needs for the local elderly who are not allowed to leave their homes due to COVID-19 movement restrictions. From April to October 2020, the initiative assisted more than 400 senior citizens. In Singapore, the lowest-income families reside in 'rental flats' (housing provided by the government for Singaporeans who cannot afford other housing options). Due to a variety of factors, these families are often unable to provide for themselves even in regular times, making them even more vulnerable in situations like the three-month lockdown that Singapore

enforced in 2020. Recognising this vulnerability, two Singaporean youths initiated 'Project Stable Staples' to provide food supplies to these families. Since its inception, Stable Staples has collected over SGD165,000 in donations and provided vouchers (for groceries and household items) to over 1,250 individuals from more than 260 flats.

These are but a few instances of youth volunteering across the region during COVID-19. They clearly reflect the compassion of the youth towards their fellow citizens. As Nurainie Haziqah, a co-founder of Happy Bank, opined when asked about her motivation to volunteer: "We hold on to the principle: no one left behind." This inclusive attitude is complemented by the cooperative nature of youth action. Asked about youth volunteering in Indonesia, Walid Dalimunthe, one of the three youth who began #DiRumahAja, noted how the country's many large-scale youth movements had worked hand-in-hand with the government to support affected citizens.

It is not all roses with youth volunteering, however. The scale of the issues and the personal desire to help can overwhelm many young volunteers, affecting their mental health and making them feel helpless or burned out. Francesca Wah, Co-founder of Stable Staples and a seasoned volunteer, described feeling 'burdened' with uncertainty around how much longer the pandemic would last and whether the project could continue serving its beneficiaries. It is therefore vital that authorities and governments develop holistic and long-term support systems for young people as much as possible, especially in areas such as mental health and well-being.

Speaking to an audience in 2005, Nelson Mandela expressed that, "Sometimes, it falls upon a generation to be great." The COVID-19 pandemic is likely a watershed moment in the lives of hundreds of millions of youth. And it has fallen upon them to be great, both in thoughts and deeds, for the post-pandemic world will need compassion and collaborative action more than ever. Going by their volunteerism, Southeast Asia's youth appear ready to rise to the occasion.

**Mr. Ankush Wagle** was an intern at the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.



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A young girl volunteering to give out food in Chiang Mai, Thailand during the COVID-19 pandemic

# ONE-PILLAR PAGODA

## Vietnam

One-Pillar Pagoda (known locally as *Chùa Một Cột*) is a historic Buddhist temple and iconic landmark in Vietnam's capital city, Hanoi. Built in 1049, it consists of a wooden pagoda with a curved roof perched on top of a single 4-metre stone pillar. According to court annals, the then childless Emperor dreamt that he had met the Goddess of Mercy who gave him a son while seated on a lotus flower. The Emperor later married a young farm girl who bore him his male heir. Designed to resemble a lotus blossom (a symbol of purity) rising out of the small lake which surrounded it, the pagoda was constructed to symbolise the Emperor's gratitude at the fortuitous turn of events. Destroyed in 1954 by the French Expeditionary Force, it was restored to its former glory the year after. (Source: Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Vietnam; Hanoi Tourism Department, Vietnam; Lonely Planet)

