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ASEAN Way driving transition from association to community

Organization to be upgraded by the end of 2015

INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations has proven to be the most successful cooperative organization in the region. Building upon its legacy, an “ASEAN Community” will be established by the end of 2015. The success of ASEAN has prompted scholars to contemplate the theoretical and practical implications of how Southeast Asian countries have managed to effect regional cooperation as well as the meaning of the “ASEAN Way.”

Understanding ASEAN

ASEAN was formed in response to separatist movements, wars, political upheaval and poverty. Through concerted efforts, member nations achieved a level of stability, peace, cooperation and development that is unprecedented in the region's past. As a regional cooperation organization, ASEAN has played a unique role in uniting Southeast Asian countries.

Instead of blindly following the path of the European Union, member nations have forged their own guideline: the ASEAN Way. Under the guideline, regional matters have been settled within the organizational framework in order to maintain group cohesion. Expansion and improvement have been achieved in a progressive manner.

Moreover, economic development is the top priority. Countries of the region are expected to open up domestic markets and optimize economic environments. In October 2003, leaders of the member nations announced that the organization will be upgraded to form the “ASEAN Community” in 2020. Unlike the EU, the new community is not a unitary system. Instead, it entails three separate frameworks: economic, socio-cultural and security.

Judging from the trajectory of ASE-



A gourmet chef demonstrates how to make signature Thai cuisine at the 12th China-ASEAN Expo Thai Exhibition held in Bangkok from April 2 to 4. The expo is an important occasion for bilateral cultural exchange.



The 48th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting is held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on Aug. 4, 2015.



The 17th ASEAN Plus Three Summit is held in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, on Nov. 13, 2014. The “three” refers to China, Japan and South Korea.

AN, regional cooperation has proven to be an efficient approach to stability, peace and advancement. Step by step, member nations have managed to form a culture of reciprocity and an understanding of shared interest, which has elevated the influence of the entire region.

Admittedly, ASEAN is not perfect. For instance, under the principle of noninterventionism, member nations are granted a high level of autonomy. It is for this reason that some countries have gone their own way and put other countries' interest at risk from time to time. In the event that this occurs, ASEAN is helpless to

keep those that violate the rules in check. Although its inclusive stance offers member states flexibility, this often comes at the expense of execution and efficiency.

ASEAN as regional bellwether

To protect its core interest and cohesion, ASEAN has always upheld its own stance and striven to be the dominant party in outbound cooperation. One of its strategic concerns is forging power equilibrium. By bringing in different outside forces, ASEAN has managed to safeguard regional affairs from being dictated by any single major country, thus minimizing the risk of conflicts and wars triggered by power imbalances.

ASEAN has no intention of confronting major countries head-on. Instead, it relies on soft power to deal with major countries and regional affairs. Second, ASEAN has always taken a lead in building cooperative mechanisms. One of its concerns is to balance diverse opinions and build consensus in a way that favors the interest of the entire organization.

When member nations fail to compromise with each other or work together for a common cause, leaders of the organization will step in and mediate disputes. While ASEAN has been accused of being indecisive on

vital issues and ineffective in policy implementation, member nations still trust ASEAN and count on its leadership to promote collective interest. Much to the delight of all stakeholders, the organization never seeks to dictate the regional agenda, nor does it have the authority to do so despite its prestige and credibility.

ASEAN is unlikely to be hostile to any functional organization. However, it can be sensitive to the emergence of a new institution that might challenge its primacy. China should take the possibility into serious consideration before setting out to forge an “East Asian Community.” The proposed organization ought to provide an inclusive framework and objectives for regional cooperation without threatening the prestige and authority of ASEAN. If things are done in this manner, we can expect ASEAN to support China's proposal.

New chapter

According to an up-to-date blueprint agreed upon by member countries, the “ASEAN Community” will be established at the end of 2015. The new organization has three pillars: economic, sociocultural and security. Unique in design, such a framework is a breakthrough for the structuring of regional cooperative mechanisms.

Unlike a transnational regional management system, an “economic community” is more akin to a single market and production base. It does not require a custom union and a common market. Tailored to the economic status quo of most member countries, it is an optimized version of the ASEAN Free Trade Zone. To achieve the first milestone of the economic community, member nations need to meet a series of essential criteria by the end of 2015. But unlike the EU convention, the last month of this year is not a deadline. Rather, it marks the beginning of the next stage of development.

However, ASEAN does not have the financial resources to support its members, which may partly explain the absence of a shared identity among countries of the region. To be more specific, the general public has no idea of the function and potential of the economic community. So far, ASEAN's efforts to promote and popularize its new agenda have been insufficient.

The “sociocultural community” has two missions. The first is to cultivate a spirit of reciprocity, cooperation, mutual respect and learning, and the second is to facilitate peaceful coexistence, mutual support and shared prosperity in the region. It does not seek to impose homogeneous social policies and value systems upon member countries. It is worth mentioning that the sociocultural community does not solely focus on social equality and cultural identity. Sustainable development and environmental protection are top priorities in its agenda.

The “security community” is based upon principles of noninterventionism, rejection of military force and mutual respect of sovereignty. It has four missions: to create a denuclearized, harmonious environment, to settle disputes by peaceful means, to avoid an arms race and armed conflicts, and to nurture a peace-loving culture. Obviously, the security community would not counter violence with violence or compel member nations to renounce their right of self-defense. Instead, it aims to shield the region from conflicts and chaos through forging consensus and sanctioning member nations if their actions jeopardize peace.

By making the transition from “association” to “community,” ASEAN is going to make history. The “ASEAN Community” will be built on the “ASEAN Way.” Unlike the EU, the organization does not seek to build a single market and then regulate it with dozens of laws. Instead, it emphasizes the implementation of consensus, which necessitates tangible efforts from member nations.

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