After 50th birthday: Boost ASEAN’s own security web

Many analysts have written about ASEAN’s accomplishments and deficiencies over the past week. Some believe that ASEAN has fared well given its tumultuous Cold War history. Others think it is not doing enough on critical challenges like the South China Sea or North Korea.

Such a “glass half full/half empty” debate is not surprising amid ASEAN’s golden anniversary. But the debate also speaks to questions surrounding Asia’s burgeoning security architecture.

For one thing, Asia is now an integrated complex system running on geopolitics and globalization. It is hard to argue that today South, East and Southeast Asia are independent areas. Developments in New Delhi shape the region as much as those in Beijing, Singapore or Jakarta.

Further, the line between “traditional” and “non-traditional” security challenges has disappeared. Illegal fishing has strategic ramifications. Geopolitical rivalries shape infrastructure spending. Terrorism, border disputes and natural disasters demand equal attention from regional armed forces.

As complexity and connectivity grows, Asia needs an inclusive regional architecture. One that integrates a wider set of political, security and economic institutions. One that can manage strategic challenges, maintain regional order and expand shared prosperity.

Since the 1990s, ASEAN has tried to push and show the rest of Asia in that direction. The group sought to export its “consensus-seeking” and “dialogue-building” habit through regional fora. Some had hoped that this “ASEAN way” could be the architecture’s organizing principle.

But functional differentiations eventually grew throughout the various ASEAN-led mechanisms. Some have focused more on regional security (e.g. ASEAN Regional Forum) or defense (e.g. ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus). Others have tackled economic (e.g. Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum) or political questions (e.g. East Asia Summit). These institutions have taken on a life of their own and have not been well-integrated with one another. They then settled for snap-paced meetings and processes rather than concrete strategic outcomes.

ASEAN’s security multilateralism has never matched its regional security arrangements. The Five Power Defense Arrangements involving Commonwealth members United Kingdom, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore and New Zealand, or the US alliance system, for example, continue to flourish. Nor could ASEAN-led mechanisms crowd out other regional powers offering competing strategic visions.

ASEAN was never the sole regional security architect — and whatever it designed went sideways. As such, we now have a patchy architecture unsuitable for day-to-day security challenges.

Little wonder that some ASEAN members turn to non-ASEAN security solutions. Consider the Sulu Sea tripartite patrols involving Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, or how other members use ASEAN as a chip to extract great power favors or a tool to serve domestic political goals. Think of the debates over Cambodia’s 2012 ASEAN chairmanship.

If ASEAN members think little of the group, why should we expect regional powers to see it as a strategic asset worth investing in? One way to stem this tide is for ASEAN to consider temporarily halting the growth in extra-regional security engagements. These engagements (more than a dozen a year) have left officials less time and resources to develop actionable mechanisms. Over time, they have come to favor quantity — more meetings — over quality regarding more concrete policies.

Engaging the region beyond Southeast Asia is at the core of ASEAN centrality. But ASEAN would be better positioned to do so if it had first strengthened intra-regional security arrangements. This was after all one of the original strategic rationales for the ASEAN political security community project.

We don’t have to start from scratch. We could revive and speed up older ideas, such as the creation of an ASEAN defense industrial council or a regional peacekeeping force. We can also debate new ones, like how to pool military resources for regional contingencies at sea.

The growth of regional defense diplomacy — where officers are stakeholders along with diplomats — could help us better translate those ideas into practice. It’s about time ASEAN focuses on actionable ideas and policies rather than spending countless hours debating if “militarization” should be in a joint statement. And it would be wise to do so without involving the rest of the region beyond Southeast Asia.

In short, as ASEAN contemplates its next decade, it might be wise to return to basics. Rather than embarking on new extra-regional engagements, why don’t we first hammer out specific and actionable intra-ASEAN security cooperation plans, from maritime security to counter-terrorism?

There aren’t simple questions one would ask at a birthday party; the same goes for golden jubilees. These questions also assume that ASEAN can act in unison. The members’ divergent interests, the Chair’s rotational nature, the Secretary General’s under-developed powers, and Indonesia’s missing leadership should all give us reason to pause.

Nonetheless, ASEAN’s strategic value depends on how well it can design, construct, and manage an inclusive security architecture. First, within Southeast Asia and then beyond the region.

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