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## ASEAN's Futures

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*The future of ASEAN is necessarily unknown. Its futures, however, can be guessed with less risk of being wrong. My purpose here is not to predict with confidence but to “pandict” with reticence—not to choose one assured future but to scan several that could conceivably occur. Also, what follows is merely a range, not the range. The five different ASEANs of the future all too briefly sketched below are meant to be suggestive, but they are neither fully exclusive nor jointly exhaustive. Potentiality outruns imagination. My hope is that by doing the easy thing—opening a few doors on paper—I may tempt analysts more knowledgeable than I to do the hard thing. That truly difficult challenge is to pick the one doorway through which ASEAN is most likely to walk or be pushed through—and to warrant that choice with the comprehensive evidence and thorough reasoning that, for lack of space and expertise, are not found here. That said, this pandiction does start with a prediction, and thereafter as well the line between speculation and expectation—the possible and the probable—will occasionally be crossed. In addition, by way of self-critique: my guessings and imaginings may overestimate the importance of China in ASEAN's futures.*

### *Will ASEAN Disappear?*

To my knowledge and recollection, none who witnessed ASEAN's creation in 1967 were optimistic enough to predict that it would live to celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. Yet it did. By 2017, notwithstanding Philip Bowring's mock obituary,<sup>1</sup> the safest thing to say about ASEAN was that it would, in some form, continue to exist. Presumably inferring its tenacity from its age, not even the critics of ASEAN were pessimistic enough to anticipate its literal demise; even Bowring pronounced it merely irrelevant.

One can of course imagine it being dissolved. The diplomats and staff go home. The secretariat at Jalan Sisingamangaraja No. 70A in Jakarta is remodeled into a shopping mall. Could this occur? Yes. But will it? Assuredly not in the near-to-medium term, and probably not in the moderately longer-run future. Why not? Because too many unlikely things would have to happen first.

One of these unlikelies is an eruption of contagious violence between ASEAN states, abetted perhaps by outsiders, that grows deadly and destabilizing on a scale large enough to destroy the association. Although the past need not be prologue, no Southeast Asian

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states have gone to war with each other *while belonging to ASEAN*. Without predicting another half-century of intramural peace, one must acknowledge the hitherto durable absence of omens of inter-member war—intramural tensions, spats, and occasional incidents aside. Certainly the existence of ASEAN has contributed to that irenic record. How, why, and to what extent is debatable; correlation is not causation. But that ASEAN has fostered peace is recognized and valued by the region's elites.

That understanding shrinks the chance of a deliberate dismantling of the group by its leaders. Why get rid of a pretty good thing? Two of ASEAN's most ardent Southeast Asian fans have even argued that it deserves a Nobel Peace Prize,<sup>2</sup> and the case for such an accolade is at least stronger than the one that warranted the award's bestowal on president Obama in December 2009. A cynic, of course, might attribute ASEAN's staying power less to its ability to preserve regional peace than to the opportunities it affords for its movers, shakers, and speakers to jet around the region.

That said, one need not be a cynic to fault ASEAN for being an under-achiever bound by its "ASEAN Way" to honor consensus over consequence, process over product. One can counter that critique by noting that ASEAN was not authored to be, nor has it become, an intrusively supranational body. But that defense comes close to implying a predetermined future and a corresponding dismissal: ASEAN will never become more than the sum of its sovereign parts, so why bother imagining otherwise?

The ASEAN Way does deserve credit. On the association's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1997, a widely regarded Southeast Asianist, Michael Leifer, wrote that "ASEAN as a club cannot be expected to transcend itself in any supranational sense."<sup>3</sup> Looking back with hindsight from the vantage point of 2017, that limit has nurtured longevity. Viewed through the eyes of its own diverse, divided, and sovereignty-conscious members, a self-restraining if not self-marginalizing ASEAN has been and remains usefully innocuous. Insofar as its member states can imagine living without it, they see no harm in living with it. By this logic, the survival of ASEAN is due at least as much to its inoffensiveness as to its accomplishments. Or, to adapt Bilahari Kausikan's metaphor,<sup>4</sup> ASEAN lives on because of what it is: a placidly stationary cow, not a contentiously purposive horse—let alone one being ridden by a Chinese, American, or any other single rider in an altogether partisan direction.

This is not to deny that China's president Xi Jinping would like to use ASEAN, whether by milking the cow for its resources or by riding the horse along a New Silk Road toward realizing his expansionary "China Dream." Beijing has already been cultivating Phnom Penh and to an extent Vientiane as well, not to mention Chinese overtures to Kuala Lumpur and Manila. In doing so, China has begun exporting into ASEAN's ranks the self-censorship that it requires of its own people. The consensus-necessitating ASEAN Way already serves China's interest in forestalling criticism of its domineering actions in the South China Sea. Beijing knows that when the subject of the South China Sea comes up at closed-door intra-ASEAN meetings to decide the wordings of communiqués, it will take but one nay-saying Chinese proxy to protect Beijing's behavior from direct textual harm. Nor are the other nine members necessarily less obsequious. The appeal and the fear of China together, albeit variably distributed across ASEAN's ten states, favor accommodation over critique let alone rebuke.

## *Five Futures*

So what will ASEAN become? Or, if wording the question this way imputes to the group more power to determine its own future than it actually has: What will become of ASEAN?

Among the many answers the question deserves, five come to mind: that in years or decades to come ASEAN will resemble (1) *a facilitating auspice*; (2) *a specialized forum*; (3) *a coopted adjunct*; (4) *a maritime remainder*; and/or (5) *a centralized union*. The “and/or” is necessary because the group could, over time, play more than one of these roles, and because some of their features may overlap as descriptors of ASEAN at the same point in time. As for the numbering, one could argue that, scanned in sequence from (1) through (5), each role differs more and more from what ASEAN is today, and that as those differences increase, the probability that ASEAN will actually play the role declines. But a convincing case to that effect would require more details than are offered here.

It is debatable, for instance, whether ASEAN’s spatial amputation (4) is less radical and more likely than its structural transformation (5). Nor does sequence imply desirability: If the inclusion of ASEAN’s present member states is valued most of all, other things being equal, a rump ASEAN (4) will look worse than a subordinated one (3) to which all ten still belong. But if ASEAN’s autonomy is most desired, and all else is held equal, (4) is better than (3). Critics of ASEAN for whom its effectiveness matters most may impute to a centralized ASEAN (5) an ability to solve regional problems that the other four roles may lack. But that judgment presupposes evidence that centralization will not trigger pushback by member states so intense as to render ASEAN (5) even less effective than (1) or (2). Constrained by limited space, the sketches that follow largely omit such complications—the details in which, it is said, the devil resides.

(1) *A facilitating auspice?* Caveats aside, of all five futures, this one is the most like the present. A glance at the crowded calendar of past and prospective events on its website is enough to suggest that ASEAN today could be nicknamed “The Great Convenor.” Roughly 1,000-to-1,500 gatherings are held under the group’s aegis every year.<sup>5</sup> But if ASEAN is a “talk shop,” its success in sponsoring discourse shows how robust the market for meeting and talking shop in Southeast Asia really is—not only among policy-minded locals but for their counterparts in the rest of Asia and, though less consistently or willingly, the rest of the world as well. The associational acronyms that ASEAN has generated encompass a panoply of committees and convocations, venues and outcomes, all in the name of international cooperation. Would Asia be better off without them? Not obviously, no. So long as the relevant actors would rather talk than fight, and pending the rise of a rival auspice—China comes to mind—ASEAN may at least remain, in this first scenario, the region’s go-to host.

(2) *A specialized forum?* ASEAN’s futures implicate two important distinctions—sectoral and spatial. A sectoral emphasis would, for example, highlight ASEAN’s roles vis-à-vis regional security on the one hand and regional economy on the other. In one such scenario, stymied by a combination of Chinese intimidation, American hesitation (if not indifference), and the consensus-requiring “ASEAN Way,” ASEAN relinquishes a security role in order to specialize in matters of regional trade and investment. Relevant

issues in this reduced portfolio could include finalizing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, “organ harvesting” the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and improving the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement and the ASEAN Economic Community. Concomitantly, ASEAN as a Political-Security Community would be de-emphasized, and ASEAN’s already limited role in regional security would be ceded to, or sidelined by, outsiders—China acting alone or jointly with Russia, for instance, or perhaps a combination of Japan, India, and a post-Trump America “re-pivoted” toward Asia.

(3) *A coopted adjunct?* This third future imagines China mattering more and more. If president Xi Jinping’s tenure runs to 2022 or beyond and China’s political economy remains stable and strong, his China Dream could turn—return?—Southeast Asia into a tributary region. ASEAN’s clientelistic purpose in that context would be to propitiate its Chinese patron while leveraging benefits from deference. The unlikely democratization of China need not change this scenario insofar as Chinese nationalism could be magnified by popular will. A Second Asian Financial Crisis triggered by turbulence in China’s economy could, however, derail the process of cooptation pending China’s recovery. In any event, cooptation would not deprive ASEAN of all autonomy. Much as the British empire favored “indirect rule” through traditional local institutions, China could try to inculcate in ASEAN a usefully intermediary role.

(4) *A maritime remainder?* When Xi Jinping speaks of a shared Sino-Southeast Asian “community of common destiny,” he evokes the tyranny of proximity—spatial fatalism. America is far away, China is near, and this will always be so; your only choice is to adapt. If Southeast Asia’s proximity to China breeds comity, or at least compliance, rather than contempt, Beijing can expect warmer future relations with its adjacent—subcontinental—neighbors, excluding Vietnam due to the strength of its identity and the historical record of its resistance to Chinese designs. By the same cartographic logic, China could expect cooler dealings with the sea-girt states to the south and east. In extremis, over time, ASEAN could cede its region’s northern tier, Vietnam again plausibly excluded, to an emerging Sinosphere. The association would be reduced to representing Southeast Asia’s mainly maritime remainder. A plausible leader of that remainder would be Indonesia, equipped by its size and its majority-Muslim faith to escape peacefully the deeper penetration and fiercer embrace that Beijing would have successfully levied on ASEAN’s northern tier. In this future, conceivably depending on the outcome of another Sino-Vietnamese war, ASEAN could lose most or all of its mainland states to a nascent Greater China in a coerced “common destiny” after all.

(5) *A centralized union?* “Centrality” and “centralization” sound similar. But if centrality is about preserving ASEAN’s role as the region’s host, centralization is about empowering ASEAN to act. Because, as argued above, the ASEAN Way of consensus prevents the group from moving controversially beyond lowest common denominators, member states are less motivated to defect. That helps keep the association together, which helps it maintain centrality in the eyes of non-ASEAN states that are willing to participate in gatherings under its inclusive and anodyne aegis. But if centrality is a matter of external diplomatic convenience, centralization controversially meets a disputed need for hard-to-do internal reform. ASEAN as a centralized union? It seems impossible. The member states do not want it. It threatens the national sovereignties that their respective leaders cherish. It upends the ASEAN Way of decentralization.

Reallocating authority sharply upward and inward could even trigger a local version of the tumultuous would-be “Brexit” that has discredited centripetal Europe.

### *Supranationalization?*

Would an existential crisis finally prove Michael Leifer wrong by shocking ASEAN into “transcend[ing] itself” in a “supranational sense”? Almost assuredly not. China’s militarizing expansion in the South China Sea has not even prompted ASEAN’s four claimant states to settle their differences and adopt a common stance toward Beijing, let alone caused ASEAN’s larger membership to unify against Chinese expropriation of the heartwater of Southeast Asia. Even if China physically attacked and seized a land feature occupied by one ASEAN state, the other nine would likely not respond by collectively ceding authority for regional security to ASEAN. They would instead prioritize strengthening their respective national defenses and their partnerships with powerful outsiders, including, for some, China itself.

In coming years, the economic pull and political push of China will likely continue to divide and decenter ASEAN. Eventually, however, domestic concerns could turn China’s attention inward, creating breathing room for Southeast Asia. ASEAN’s ratio of trade with itself has long been stuck at between a fifth and a fourth of its total trade. Steady increments of complementarity among its member economies could, by raising the ratio, help make the “One Community” in ASEAN’s motto less fictive, at least in a material sense. Rising inter-member trust could allow subsets of the ten—ASEAN minus X—to reach specialized agreements without offending the states in the “X.” If those agreements benefited the region as a whole, gains in horizontal trust could incubate growing vertical trust in the authority of a strengthened secretariat to act on behalf of the group.

In 2011 ASEAN’s Bali Concord III came close to suggesting the unthinkable: that ASEAN, in effect, develop its own foreign policy as a rules-based organization with a strengthened secretariat and a “common voice” able to articulate a “common platform” in world affairs. Notably omitted from the document was any reference to the ASEAN Way. Notwithstanding pressures from outside powers such as China and the United States, it is at least conceivable that a centralized future imagined in Bali in 2011 could eventually, against the odds, be achieved.

ASEAN is not Southeast Asia. The group has ten members; the region has 650 million. Of the above scenarios, which ones are most and least likely? Which ones would benefit those millions the most and the least? These presumptuous questions bypass the likelihood—the certainty?—that not one of the five futures sketched herein does justice to what will actually occur. No amount of scenario-spinning by outsiders will ensure a celebration of ASEAN’s centenary in 2067. That will depend on the wise application of indigenous talent and energy to challenges and opportunities whose shape and import cannot yet be known. As futurology turns into fact, what will matter is not the survival of ASEAN but the flourishing of Southeast Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Bowring, “Obituary: Association of Southeast Asian Nations (1967– 2016),” *Asia Sentinel*, 29 April 2016, <http://www.asiasentinel.com/politics/obituary-association->

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[southeast-asian-nations/](http://southeast-asian-nations/).

<sup>2</sup> See Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffery Sng, “Why Asean Deserves a Nobel Peace Prize,” <http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/why-asean-deserves-a-nobel-peace-prize>, excerpted from their book, *The Asean Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace* (Singapore, NUS Press, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Leifer, “Whither ASEAN?,” *The Round Table*, 304 (1987), p. 482.

<sup>4</sup> Bilahari Kausikan, “ASEAN Is a Cow, Not a Horse,” *The Middle Ground*, 6 October 2015, <http://themiddleground.sg/2015/10/06/asean-cow-not-horse-bilahari-kausikan/>. Also possibly relevant is my own “ASEAN between China and America: Is It Time to Try Horsing the Cow?,” *Trans –Regional and –National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 5: 1 (January 2017), pp. 1-23, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/trans-trans-regional-and-national-studies-of-southeast-asia/article/asean-between-china-and-america-is-it-time-to-try-horsing-the-cow/793AFAA432688BC8D57919C49195BD89>.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Beeson, “ASEAN’s and Asia’s Continuing Lack of Leadership,” paper, ISA International Conference, Hong Kong, 15-17 June 2017, p. 13; Catherine A. Traywick, “As New ASEAN Chair, Myanmar Braces for Year of 1,000 Meetings,” *Foreign Policy*, 11 October 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/10/11/as-new-asean-chair-myanmar-braces-for-year-of-1000-meetings/>.