Regional Structures and Responses to Security Challenges in Southeast Asia

By

Mely Caballero-Anthony

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1. Introduction: An Era of Prolonged Uncertainties

The recurring questions that confront us today speak to two issues: (1) the adequacy of our regional responses to security challenges in the region, and (2) the urgency of re-thinking our existing security structures (and practices) in the light of new types of security threats.

Indeed, one only needs to have a quick scan at the headline news to recognise the wide-range of issues that dominate the security agenda of the East Asian region today. Over the past three years, the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States have had serious repercussions on the security of the region. The event has heightened the vulnerability of states to acts of terrorism as the extent and the nature of terrorist threats facing Southeast Asia have unfolded—starting with the discovery of local terrorist networks in the region like Jemaah Islamiyah, to the increase in terrorist linked activities like the series of bombings in Indonesia. Added to these has been the sluggish growth and poor economic outlook in the region, exacerbated by the Iraq war in March 2003 and the health crisis brought on by the infectious disease—Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and more recently, the emergence of the Bird Flu disease. In Northeast Asia, the North Korean nuclear weapons programme has fuelled new tensions in the Korean peninsula while the reverberations along the Taiwan Straits and the South China Sea continue. To be sure, Southeast Asia and the wider Asia have become a hotbed of crises – some are nascent while others are simmering. Unless these crises are resolved or managed carefully, the region could find itself engulfed in a maelstrom of security threats.

How have our regional institutions, particularly the ASEAN and the ARF, coped with these challenges? At the 36th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting held on 16 – 19 June 2003 in Phnom Penh, which was followed by the 10th Meeting of the ARF,
significant initiatives were proposed to enable ASEAN and (by extension) the ARF to respond more effectively to the new challenges facing the region. One of which was the Indonesian concept of an ASEAN Security Community (ASC). The concept of a security community “was meant to provide a sense of purpose, a practical goal, and a future condition that all [ASEAN] members should strive for.”

To achieve this, Indonesia has proposed the establishment of several institutions to deal with security issues. Based on preliminary reports, the types of institutions proposed include: an ASEAN Centre for Combating Terrorism, ASEAN Peace Keeping Training Centre, and ASEAN Maritime Surveillance Centre. (This is dealt with in more detail in the latter section of this paper).

The initiatives that have emerged can be viewed as positive signs in efforts at enhancing the capabilities of regional institutions to cope with emerging issues that threaten the security and stability of the region. That these initiatives came from within ASEAN reflect the growing sense within the organisation of their limitations in responding effectively to new challenges. These initiatives can also be viewed as ASEAN’s attempt to become more pro-active in a rapidly changing strategic environment. A number of questions arise from these developments, such as: How radical are the proposals on building new institutions in ASEAN? What are their implications on the prevailing modalities that characterise ASEAN’s diplomacy? How viable are these new ideas given the varying disparities among ASEAN member states?

The above questions are certainly not exhaustive and may require comprehensive analyses, which are beyond the scope of a single paper. The objectives of this paper therefore are two-fold. Firstly, it will provide a brief assessment of how regional institutions have managed regional crises in East Asia. Secondly, against the new security challenges in the region, the paper will examine the prospects of new mechanisms that have emerged or are being proposed to address security challenges in the region.

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3 Ibid.
2. Assessing Regional Structures and Responses

Assessing regional capacities inevitably leads one to revisit our understanding of the two major institutions that we have that deal with regional security namely, ASEAN and the ARF. The point of the exercise is essentially to argue that it is only after we have evaluated what ASEAN and the ARF have and have not done in the crises-type/ridden circumstances could we objectively make practical suggestions about the need for new tools to be considered or for certain security practices to be revamped.

In this regard, allow me to highlight some of the observations on the functions of ASEAN and the ARF:

1. It has been argued that ASEAN and by extension, the ARF, had been mostly an “enterprise” for regional reconciliation. As such, the institutional development of ASEAN has been parsimonious, and whatever institutions established were geared mainly for engendering an environment for trust and confidence building among members particularly during the formative years of ASEAN. Thus, over the past 4 decades, ASEAN had chosen to take a very conservative path to ensure a stable transition and to the extent possible—a smoother calibration of relationships among its members. The same holds true for the ARF which continues to place a lot of emphasis on developing a wide range of confidence building measures. As a consequence, when crisis occurred that needed specialised expertise to respond to cases of financial meltdowns, environmental disasters, peacekeeping operations, and highly infectious epidemics, ASEAN and the ARF were more often than not--unprepared. The kinds of crises and challenges that confront the region today require much more than what a loosely structured organization could provide.

2. Against the lack of institutional capacity and/or expertise, ASEAN’s responses to crises have also been mostly ad hoc in fashion. These types of responses were most visible during the 1997-78 period when the region was beset by a series of crisis. To recapitulate, these ad hoc responses included establishing the ASEAN Troika to respond to crisis in Cambodia, instituting the Bilateral Swap Arrangement to help badly affected economies at the
height of the Asian financial crisis, and the Regional Haze Action Plan to fight the haze problem caused by the forest fires in Indonesia, and the deepening of intelligence cooperation to combat transnational crime and terrorism, etc.

3. Despite the fact that while many of the crisis responses may have been ad hoc, the region had seen some considerable action from ASEAN states. This was contrary to the impressions at that time, especially at the height of the Asian financial crisis, that regional countries would become more inward-looking and this would consequently affect cooperation among members. To push this argument further, we examine ASEAN’s collaborative efforts post the 97 crises and in the aftermath of the Sept 11 terrorist attacks. In the interest of time, the responses of ASEAN and the ARF to two major non-traditional security challenges are highlighted/summarised below to support this argument. These challenges are the ‘war’ against terrorism and the threat of infectious diseases.
On the Fight Against Terrorism

- Against the ‘war on terrorism’, ASEAN members during the 7th ASEAN Summit in 2001, issued an ASEAN Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism which outlined several measures to fight terrorism. These included: deepening co-operation among front-line law enforcement agencies in combating terrorism and sharing “best practices; enhancing information/intelligence exchange to facilitate the flow of information, in particular, on terrorists and terrorist organizations, their movement and funding, and any other information needed to protect lives, property, and the security of all modes of travel, and others.  

- Under the ASEAN framework, member states signed the Agreement on Information Exchange and Establishment of Communication Procedures on 7 May 2002 to promote cooperation in combating transnational crime, including terrorism. Similarly, ASEAN and the United States issued a Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism on 1 August 2002, which committed the US and all ten ASEAN members to improve intelligence- gathering efforts, strengthen capacity-building measures and enhance mutual cooperation.

- Given the close linkages between transnational crime and terrorism, provision of mutual legal assistance in criminal matters and extradition agreements have been discussed within the framework of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime as tools to address this problems. This framework has been expanded to the ASEAN + 3 level with the first ASEAN + 3 Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC +3) held in Bangkok, Thailand in January 2004.

- As part of the continuing efforts to build capacity in fighting terrorism, the ASEAN region has seen the establishment of three complementary bodies: the Southeast Asia Regional Center for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT) based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation (JCLEC), and the international Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) in Bangkok.

- There have also been several activities undertaken under the auspices of the ARF. After the September 11 attacks, two workshops were held under the ARF Inter-Sessional Group (ISG) on Confidence Building Measures. The first was organised by Malaysia-U.S. Workshop on Financial Measures Against Terrorism held in Honolulu (24-25 Marcy 2002) and the

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4 See the 2001 ASEAN Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism, Bandar Seri Begawan, 5 November 2001.
5 See Joint Communiqué of the Special ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Terrorism, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 20-21 May 2002.
6 US State Department of State, 2002.
Thailand-Australia Workshop on Prevention of Terrorism held in Bangkok on 17-19 April 2002. The recommendations of both meetings were adopted in the Statement of the 9th ARF Meeting in July 2002. Highlights of this meeting include:

- The establishment of the Inter-sessional Meeting on Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime (ISM on CT-TC). To date this group has had two meetings, the latest one held in Manila on 30-31 March 2004 highlighted institutional and legal measures taken at the domestic level and recommendations to allow for domestic and international counter-terrorism measures to complement each other.

- Among these measures include blocking terrorist financing and looking at possible coordination with International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and the Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering (FATL).

- Enhancing measures to ensure transport security and enhancing Maritime Anti-Piracy and counter-terrorism cooperation. A series of measures to tackle the piracy problem have been identified. These included better information sharing, cooperation and training in anti-piracy measures, and the provision of technical assistance and capacity building to states in need of equipment, training and legal expertise. There are also plans to create a legal framework to combat piracy, calling for the adherence to the Rome Convention to prevent and suppress piracy incidents and a consideration of an IMB proposal to have prescribed traffic lanes for large super tankers on the high seas, wherever possible, with coast guard and naval escort.
Infectious Diseases (SARS and Bird Flu)

- Two months after the outbreak, ASEAN convened an emergency meeting among its health ministers and its leaders. A special ASEAN + 3 meeting was also held back to back with the ASEAN meetings. These meetings had outlined several measures to address the SARS epidemic. These included steps such as:
  - Exchanging of information, best practices in containing infectious diseases, even legislation (e.g. quarantine laws);
  - Strengthening cooperation among front line enforcement agencies such as health, immigration, customs, transport and law enforcement; and
  - Harmonising travel procedures to ensure proper health screening at the points of origin and arrival.

- Other measures considered were enhancing cooperation between ASEAN and WHO; developing an ASEAN Centre for Disease Control; and developing a regional surveillance system to complement the WHO-inspired Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network.

- With the outbreak of the ‘bird flu’ virus, ASEAN adopted in June 2003 the Framework ASEAN+3 Action Plan on Prevention and Control of SARS and Other Infectious Diseases. An ASEAN Experts Group on Communicable Diseases (AEGCD) has also been established to further develop the Framework ASEAN+3 Action Plan on Prevention and Control of SARS and Other Infectious Diseases into the ASEAN+3 Emerging Infectious Diseases (EID) Programme. The latter is an integrated action plan and implementation strategy to increase the effectiveness of regional surveillance, early warning and response to emerging and resurging infections, thus helping to reduce the economic, social and disease burden from emerging and resurging infections that threaten the region.

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8 Joint Statement of the Special ASEAN + 3 Health Ministers Meeting on Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Siem Reap, Cambodia, 10-11 June 2003, accessed from http://www.aseansec.org/14824.htm.
9 Ibid.

4. Under the given circumstances, one should not therefore dismiss the efforts taken by ASEAN members to cooperate in addressing certain problems that were within their capabilities to do. Nonetheless, there were clearly certain crises which were clearly beyond their limited capacities to respond, like the crisis in East Timor that required rapid deployment of peacekeeping forces to avert the humanitarian disaster that had unfolded.

5. There still remains however the question of effectiveness of these ad hoc responses. In this regard, one would agree that without a strong Secretariat, and with limited resources both financial and human resources, among others, the effectiveness of the regional measures would be severely handicapped. The problem is even magnified with regard to the ARF which after 10 years since its inception has still no Secretariat of its own. The progress to date in this regard is the establishment of an ARF Unit within the ASEAN Secretariat that was operational since 1 March 2004.

6. Given the above factors, the nature of regional capacities and responses indicates one crucial fact, that is; ASEAN as well as the ARF can only be as strong and as effective as how member states want it to be. And, whether or not member states agree to push the limits of their cooperation would also depend on their respective domestic capacities to cope with their own domestic challenges.

Against these observable trends, it is not surprising that one comes up with a mixed—perhaps ambivalent assessment of regional institutions or regional security structures. The point being argued here is the need to have a more realistic picture of what these regional structures, like ASEAN, have been so far in order to adopt a more realistic yardstick to measure its capacities. In the case of ASEAN, one could argue that it was clearly created for a specific purpose during a particular milieu. Four decades later, the international and regional landscapes have changed dramatically. At the very least, ASEAN has attempted to adjust to changing circumstances by establishing regional mechanisms, as highlighted in the previous section of this paper. The bigger challenge however is in proving that these new mechanisms are adequate to respond to emerging and more complex challenges.
2. Prospects for Change?

In assessing regional responses and capacities, one must not also forget that regional structures like ASEAN have also changed drastically with the addition of new members into the grouping. Hence, on top of the new challenges that have been brought on by the changing strategic environment, one must not overlook the kinds of challenges that have emerged as a result of this expansion. Much have already been written about this issue but it bears reiterating here some of the “new” challenges that have emerged and which ASEAN as an organization has been grappling with. These includes: the diversity of political regimes of new members—Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and even Vietnam; the stark differences in the level of economic development; the impact of these “diversities” on ASEAN modalities such as the process of consultation, dialogue, and consensus decision-making; and how all these differences pose a serious challenge to—ASEAN’s socialisation and norm-building, its cohesion and institutionalisation.

The scorecard is even more inconclusive with regard to the ARF. But so far, even its fiercest critics would agree that as a multilateral forum for discussion of security, the ARF has had moderate success in confidence building in the region. Member states have recognised the importance of the ARF as a vehicle for airing their own security perceptions. Some analysts in fact credit the socialisation through the ARF of engendering a more positive attitude from states that were initially suspicious towards multilateralism.

In addressing therefore issue of regional structures/institutions and enhancing regional capacities, a key question that this paper has examined was whether or not the international (or regional) community has been expecting too much from

12 See for example, Tan See Seng, et.al. *A New Agenda for the ASEAN Regional Forum*, IDSS Monograph No. 4 (Singapore: IDSS, 2002).
ASEAN—and for that matter the ARF. Clearly, some of the expectations that had been aired in commentaries and regional analyses did not match what these two organizations have been set up to do. The other point is to consider whether the nature of cooperation within ASEAN—be it in the political, economic and security-related areas has changed against the emerging new challenges and the prevalence of old problems.

As mentioned previously, one could suggest that cooperation has in fact deepened in certain areas, contrary to expectations that regional and domestic crises would preoccupy most member states and consequently make them disinterested in regional initiatives. A solid case in this instance is the realisation and the progress of AFTA. AFTA has been a showcase of how “bold” ASEAN has gone to change the modalities of ASEAN from one based on informal agreements to more rule-based arrangements.

Even more radical is the agreement to establish an ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) by 2020, which would involve a higher level of economic integration. This idea has since been formalised in the 2003 ASEAN Bali Concord which lays the foundations for the creation of an ASEAN Community by 2020. The community will be set up on three pillars, namely ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and ASEAN Security Community (ASC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. The AEC and the ASC have been most interesting, in so far as they provide some insights on the directions that ASEAN is taking in moving towards a closer community and adopting modalities beyond the ASEAN way.

Yet, given the altered international environment what indeed are the prospects for change? The answer to this question would depend on what and how change is defined. If change refers to reforming ASEAN’s organizational structure and enhance its capabilities to deal with regional crisis, then the emergence of new mechanisms like the ones found in Bali Concord II indicate that ASEAN is indeed moving in that

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13 Chairman’s Statement of the 8th ASEAN Summit, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 4 November 2002.
14 See Declaration of ASEAN Concord II (Bali Concord II), Bali, Indonesia, 7 October 2003 at http://www.aseansec.org. See also Towards an ASEAN Community, (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2003).
15 For more on this issue, see Mely Caballero-Anthony, Regional Security in Southeast Asia: Beyond the ASEAN Way (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005).
direction, albeit in a slow pace. Of the three pillars, the plans for setting up the twin pillars of an ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and ASEAN Security Community (ASC) provide some insight into the direction that ASEAN is taking as it moves towards becoming a community with modalities that extend beyond those of the heretofore ASEAN Way.

**ASEAN Security Community (ASC)**

It is propitious at this juncture to have a closer look at the ASC proposal. Indonesia—the most recent ASEAN Chair—proposed the establishment of a security community as a regional framework to handle security matters and disputes rather than the bilateral or international forums. A careful reading of Bali Concord II reveals four important elements that would allow a security community to be realised, namely, norms setting, conflict prevention, approaches to conflict resolution and post-conflict peace-building. Aside from norms-setting which is already an integral part of the ASEAN Way—the other three elements are novel initiatives that have found their way into official discourses and are now being taken up at discussions at the official level. Press reports and briefings given by Indonesian officials, as well as personal interviews have revealed something about the mechanisms being deliberated, and the ideas currently being floated include the following:

- **Conflict prevention:**
  - convening regular ASEAN Defence Ministers Meetings
  - conducting more military exchanges between defence officials, military academies in addition to enhanced bilateral military exchanges, and
  - producing an ASEAN Annual Security Outlook.

To respond to rising concerns regarding maritime security, the establishment of an ASEAN Maritime Safety and Surveillance Unit has also been proposed with the aim of standardising procedures and classification of criminal acts at sea such as armed-robbery at sea, piracy, maritime terrorism and illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing. More recently, this proposal had been “amended” to the establishment of a Maritime Security Forum.
Conflict resolution:
- Instituting an ASEAN Dispute Settlement Mechanism on political and security areas. In this regard, there have been suggestions to make the High Council become more like a judicial body rather than a political entity.
- Establishing an Eminent Persons Group and an expert advisory committee to provide advice and extend assistance to conflict parties are only being discussed.
- Establishing an ASEAN Peace-keeping force.

Post-conflict peace building:
- Establishing a mechanism for delivery of humanitarian assistance, which may include providing safe havens in conflict areas, repatriation of refugees, etc.
- Establishing a mechanism to mobilise necessary resources to facilitate post-conflict peace building (e.g. ASEAN Stability fund)

The other ideas being proposed by Indonesia under the ASC plan of action also include the possibility of an ASEAN-wide extradition treaty and a non-aggression treaty. There has also been the push to establish a Regional Human Rights Commission—a regional agenda that has been stalled for some time.

III. Implications of ASC on Regional Security in Southeast Asia

The road map for the implementation of the ASC are currently being debated and it would not be surprising if these proposals would be brought back to the drawing board many times over. Nevertheless, something important is indeed happening in the region and this development/or developments need to be captured as we address the question of regional responses to regional challenges.  

The thing that stands out in the foregoing discussion is the fact that the kinds of regional mechanisms that are being proposed have been significantly different from previous types of regional arrangements. These are significant in that they encourage a wider and deeper type of regional cooperation that would be considered as being intrusive to the domestic affairs of states. As mentioned earlier, the current

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16 In contrast to the AEC where officials are already working on the possibility of establishing a high-level judicial body that will be staffed by judges from every ASEAN member country to enforce the Protocol on DSM on economic matters, this has been a contentious issue with dealing with political disputes.

17 See Caballero-Anthony, Regional Security in Southeast Asia: Beyond the ASEAN Way, op. cit
arrangements to combat terrorism in the region, for example, are illustrative of how reservations and concerns about protecting one’s sovereignty are being addressed in a cooperative manner rather than one that is confrontational in nature. It is remarkable for instance that ASEAN countries are now talking about the possibility of a transnational judicial system for cooperation in “collecting evidence, investigating suspects and witnesses…and extraditing criminals”.  

This optimism however has to be tempered with the kinds of domestic challenges faced by countries in the region. These would include among others, the lack of institutions and/or institutional capacity to carry out some of the regional initiatives agreed upon and the kind of political transitions that are taking place in the region that define the political and security environment of respective states. One only has to look at the current debates with regard to the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI) proposals to get a glimpse of the kinds of political and security dynamics taking place in the region that reflect the extent to which certain types of regional initiatives are regarded by states in Southeast Asia.

Thus, in looking at the prospects of moving the ASC forward, it is useful to reiterate here some of the important considerations raised in Report on the ASEAN Community Roundtable organised by the Institute of Southeast Asia Studies (ISEAS), Singapore to realistically assess the chances of these proposals being accepted. I shall highlight 3 points from the Report:

1. The need to tread carefully in pushing some of the elements of the ASC. The Report recommends that “there is a need to be realistic in taking account of the urgency and relevance of the many proposals. Not all ASEAN members are at the same comfort level vis-à-vis the specific proposals. Time and patience are essential in getting a broad base of acceptance.”

20 Ibid. p.9.
2. The need to examine what can be implemented in the short-medium-long term. The Report noted that “the more sensitive elements of the ASC (such as counter-terrorism, extradition, intrusive peacekeeping and peace building) should be formulated in a more delicate manner or they will not find acceptance among some ASEAN members.” For example, “proposal for an ASEAN peacekeeping force is one that requires careful study given its practical implications for joint training, inter-operability, organizational structure, command and control as well as funding. This is something that should be relegated to the long term…[while] a peacekeeping training centre as opposed to a peacekeeping force is a short-term possibility in that it does not require a big leap in faith.”

3. The importance of building on bilateral cooperation as part of these regional mechanisms. The Report noted that “bilateral security co-operation will have to be taken into account [since] bilateral co-operation is a very important part of the security building process in ASEAN. Nor does the ASC diminish the significance of bilateral defence linkages between some ASEAN states and extra-regional powers such as the USA. These should be seen as complementary to the ASC.”

Against these considerations, one could nevertheless conclude that the project of an ASEAN Security Community comes at a time when the region is at the throes of significant changes. That a security community has been declared as an end-goal of ASEAN co-operation is laudable. It has been said that ASEAN cooperates best under pressure, hence the timing of the ASC could not be better. The current security agenda of ASEAN is therefore well fitted to support current security strategies covering as it does a number of non-traditional threats facing the region.

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21 Ibid. p.10.
22 Ibid. p.11.