

# **Multilateral Institutions in Asia**

Byron Chong

Centre on Asia and Globalisation, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy,  
National University of Singapore

April 2021

## Summary

### *Characteristics of multilateral arrangements in Asia*

- Strong emphasis on **sovereignty and autonomy** of members. Institutions have a loose and fluid structure, with secretariats designed to have little authority and power. Important issues are discussed collectively and decided by members themselves through **consensus**.
- **Non-use of force and the peaceful settlement of disputes** are promoted in lieu of effective conflict management mechanisms. A focus on informality promotes frank and open communication. Though large-scale war between states have been eliminated, long running disputes have persisted, resulting in occasional clashes.
- **Non-interference** also limits the ability of institutions to effectively address the domestic security issues of its member's such as human rights abuses, refugee crisis, corruption, and insurgencies. However, with changing global norms, there is growing pressure on institutions to respond to these issues.
- Institutions are **elite-driven**. There is a greater willingness for institutions to engage with entities that support the position of elites, such as businesses and private enterprises; and less willingness to engage with entities that criticise, such as civil-society organisations.
- There is a '**variable geometry**' of organisations and mini-lateral coalitions due to the flexibility given to states to participate in different arrangements. This allows states to 'forum shop', making consensus decisions much easier to achieve but could also encourage factionalism.

### *Challenges facing Asia's multilateral institutions*

- **A rapidly changing landscape.** Countries are wrestling with the rapid pace of technology as well as demographic shifts. These changes could create pressures on governments to turn increasingly inward, weakening regional groupings. Additionally, Asia faces a host of other human security issues like climate change, disease outbreaks, rising ethnonationalism and religious radicalisation. Without strong institutional mechanisms, there is no way to ensure that members remain committed towards a cooperative solution.
- **Great power influence.** As China's power grows, it has demonstrated increasingly assertive behaviour, willing to leverage on its economic influence to its advantage, exploiting fractures and sowing discord within multilateral groups. China growing rivalry with the United States also threatens to undermine Asia's regional stability. With concerns of their great power competition accelerating the trend towards economic decoupling and technological bifurcation, divisions could appear in multilateral groups if members are forced into choosing one side over the other.
- **Unresolved disputes.** Historical animosities and territorial disputes continue to divide countries in Asia, creating create a severe trust deficit that impedes deeper regional

cooperation and coordination. This is compounded by the lack of effective dispute management mechanisms.

### *Recommendations*

- **Strengthen the financial independence of members.** Institutions should try to strengthen the financial independence of members states. This will prevent states from becoming beholden to the whims of any one power. Groups could look towards strengthening intra-regional trade, or developing alternative sources of infrastructure financing, such as with the UN.
- **Expand areas of dialogue and cooperation.** Non-interference weakens the ability of regional institutions to address the domestic challenges of its members. However, institutions could focus efforts on addressing areas of common regional concern, where members would be more open to cooperative solutions. Cooperation with external organisations like the UN and the EU in areas like providing training and exchange of best practices in different fields can improve the ability of regional institutions to respond to crises, strengthening regional cohesion.
- **Improve domestic understanding and acceptance of the role of multilateral institutions.** As regional politics become more pluralistic, domestic support for regional initiatives will become increasingly vital. Governments need to embark on public information campaigns to raise awareness of the importance of the relevant multilateral groups and the benefits they bring to the state.
- **A more inclusive Asia will be on Asia's timetable.** Greater engagement with CSOs is required to ensure that institutions do not become disconnected from the needs of their domestic populations. At the same time, CSOs should be mindful of the norms and limitations of these institutions, and focus on what can be reasonably achieved. Similarly, external organisations must be very careful when broaching sensitive subjects with Asian regional groupings. Progress in human rights is possible within Asian organisations, but will take time, and will proceed on a schedule that is acceptable to members, not to outsiders.
- **A more networked Asia.** Sub-regional institutions could work towards a more networked Asian system by focusing on complementary areas of cooperation. To ensure buy-in, this system will be similar to existing models of Asian institutions, such as being norm-driven, and adopting a fluid and loose structure. This system will likely to inherit some of the problems we see in Asia's sub-regional groupings, such as non-interference preventing effective responses, and consensus-building resulting in diluted responses. However, it would also increase the opportunity for dialogue and cooperation between different regions.

## Introduction

Unlike multilateral organisations such as the African Union or the European Union (EU), a comparable Asia-wide regional framework has never been established. Besides huge differences in language, ethnic composition, religion, culture and historical experience, many relationships throughout the region are plagued by persistent historical animosities and territorial disputes that have posed a challenge to bringing these countries together. In addition, regional states possess a strong attachment to national sovereignty due to experiences of colonialism, and are highly sensitive to any perceived interference in domestic affairs. As such, multilateral arrangements in Asia have mostly emerged at the sub-regional level, and tended to be loosely structured, giving members a high degree of autonomy.

In Southeast Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) emerged 1967 as a platform for members to reduce mutual distrust through dialogue and cooperation. To encourage participation, the organisation adopted measures that protected the sovereignty of its members. Rather than a legalist structure with binding commitments, members were instead encouraged to adhere to a set of accepted norms for state behaviour. Known collectively as the 'ASEAN Way', these norms encompassed principles of informality, organisation minimalism, non-interference, non-use of force and consensus decision-making.

The organisation also spearheaded engagement with external powers and organisations through a series of ASEAN-centric forums and institutions. These consisted of economic forums like the Chiang Mai Initiative, defence forums like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), and more broad-based cooperative forums like the ASEAN+3, and the East Asia Summit (EAS). This overlapping framework of institutions and forums provided a platform for members to develop robust bilateral and multilateral relationships with extra-regional powers, while strengthening ASEAN centrality within the region.

Over time, ASEAN has gradually evolved, becoming a more institutionalised entity. The organisation gained its legal personality in 2008 with the adoption of the ASEAN Charter, and moved to establish the ASEAN Community in 2015, pushing the region towards greater economic integration.

In Northeast Asia, the same level of institutionalised regionalism has failed to emerge. A strong sense of mutual suspicion and mistrust has persisted, particularly among the three neighbouring states of China, Japan, and South Korea, due to a combination of historical legacies, territorial disputes and contemporary regional geopolitics. Moreover, the US 'hub-and-spoke' system of bilateral security alliances with Japan and South Korea created further fissures along political and security lines. These issues hindered the emergence of an ASEAN-style multilateral entity representative of Northeast Asia. As such, engagement between the states occurs mostly on a bilateral basis, with multilateral interactions taking place through structured meetings such as the China-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Summit, or informally along the sidelines of forums like ASEAN+3 and the East Asian Summit.

Regardless, China had been deeply influenced by its engagement with ASEAN. When Beijing spearheaded the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001 as part of its efforts to deepen engagement with the Central Asian states, it incorporated many

characteristics of ASEAN. These included eschewing a legalistic framework and emphasising common norms—referred to as the ‘Shanghai Spirit’—like consensus decision-making and non-interference. Though the SCO has focused primarily on regional security, there have been attempts to expand trade and investment cooperation through its framework.

Like ASEAN, the SCO has also served as a platform for external engagement. Several extra-regional states have been conferred ‘observer’ and ‘dialogue partner’ status to participate in SCO-related forums, and cooperative partnerships have been established with other multilateral groups like ASEAN and the EU.

As China’s economic and political influence grew, it would go on to pursue even more ambitious multilateral arrangements. In 2013, it launched the ‘One Belt One Road’ project, now known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a series of infrastructure projects aimed at improving China’s connectivity to other parts of the world, including Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Europe and even Africa. And in 2016, it launched the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a multilateral development bank to rival the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Increasingly, China seems to be using multilateral regimes to enhance its authority and leadership within the international order.

In South Asia, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) also shared many intuitional similarities with ASEAN. Though intended to improve regional cooperation, the organisation has been held hostage to continued antagonism between India and Pakistan, and has become a largely irrelevant entity. Besides the SAARC, South Asian states also participate in a number of other multilateral arrangements, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and the Mekong Ganga Cooperation. These groupings include members from Southeast Asia, Oceania and Africa, and notably, all exclude Pakistan. Yet, it has been observed by some that these groupings have thus far failed to produce any tangible results or advanced regional cooperation in any significant way.

For India, though it lays claim to the mantle of regional leadership mantle in South Asia, it has not been particularly active in driving regional multilateral cooperation in its own backyard. Instead, it seems to prefer dealing with its neighbours on a bilateral basis where it enjoys greater bargaining leverage.<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, India has shown much greater enthusiasm in global multilateral forums. It has been a strong supporter for UN development programmes and has long advocated for a permanent seat at the UN Security Council. In negotiations with the UN and the World Trade Organization, it has been a prominent voice of the global south, championing special and differential treatment for developing nations in trade and climate change obligations.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, India was a major driving force behind the establishment of developing country coalitions like the G20 and the G33, and has engaged with other emerging economies through blocs like BRICS, IBSA, and BASICS. More recently however, India seems to have begun to move away from this position as economy and influence expands, and is increasingly adopting stances that reflect its own evolving interests.<sup>3</sup>

## Characteristics of multilateral arrangements in Asia

In order to protect the sovereignty and autonomy of members, multilateral institutions in Asia have maintained a generally loose structure. Unlike in the EU, decisions are not made by supranational governing body. Secretariats in Asian institutions generally play an administrative role with little authority to make or enforce decisions. In fact, they known to be poorly staffed and financed. In 2016, the ASEAN Secretariat employed just 300 staff and had a budget of only USD 20 million.<sup>4</sup> This deliberate weakening of the Secretariat ensures that it would never have the power to compel members.

Important matters are discussed collectively by representatives and decided upon through consensus. High-level decisions are made by heads of states when they meet at events like the ASEAN Summit and the SCO Summit, while lower-level decisions may be made by ministers and other government officials. As such, organisations like ASEAN have institutionalised a framework of regular meetings to keep up with this process. Every year, up to one thousand meetings take place among ASEAN representatives to discuss a host of different issues including finance, health, education, labour, and the environment. Such a system allows every member to have a voice at the table, and participate in the decision-making process.

Despite the emphasis on respecting sovereignty, regional institutions will still try to encourage good behaviour amongst members. In 2000, on the sidelines of the APEC summit in Brunei, the Myanmar representative was asked to provide a “progress report” on the country’s internal situation to ASEAN leaders, and in 2006, Myanmar was denied the ASEAN chair it was entitled to due to its lack of political reform.<sup>5</sup> Such use of discrete peer pressure rather than public criticism is preferred as it avoids embarrassing fellow members which would simply push them away and solve nothing. Continued dialogue and engagement is often seen as the best way to influence a change in behaviour.

When faced with disagreements between members, institutions tend to emphasise the non-use of force and encourage communication to settle disputes peacefully. The focus on informality lends itself to creating an environment for frank and open communication. In cases where a solution cannot be reached, members are encouraged to simply shelve the dispute in order to maintain unity.<sup>6</sup> This is perhaps one of the most important functions of organisations like ASEAN—as a forum for dialogue giving members the opportunity to talk through their differences and avoid differences from escalating.<sup>7</sup>

However, this approach has had mixed success. Large-scale war has been virtually eliminated in Asia, but violent clashes do occur periodically, such as along the border between China and India (both members of the SCO) last year, and between Cambodia and Thailand (both members of ASEAN) over Preah Vihear during 2008-2011.

Beyond discouraging the use of force and promoting dialogue, Asian institutions are generally ill-equipped to manage conflict amongst members. The SCO has no formal mechanisms for this purpose, and ASEAN’s mechanisms, though formally established in its Charter, are so weak as to be completely ineffective.<sup>8</sup> Most tellingly, ASEAN members have relied on non-ASEAN systems like the International Court of Justice to settle disputes like the Ligitan and Sipadan islands (between Indonesia and Malaysia) and Pedra Branca (between Malaysia and Singapore), rather than ASEAN mechanisms.

Agendas of multilateral groupings tend to reflect the interests of political elites. The emphasis on non-interference allows state governments to deal with domestic challenges to their authority and legitimacy without fearing backlash from other members. For this reason, members traditionally maintain silence over the internal affairs of their neighbours. Even widely-known issues like extrajudicial killings in the Philippines or the mistreatment of the Rohingya in Myanmar have rarely been discussed in ASEAN forums.

More recently however, this approach has become increasingly challenging. With improvements in information technology and growing acceptance of human rights norms, heavy-handed measures will now face much greater domestic and international backlash. Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia for example, have been vocal at criticising the Myanmar military's violent crackdown on protesters after the recent February 1 coup, going so far as to propose an emergency ASEAN Summit. Given the global condemnation that Myanmar had incurred, continued silence from fellow ASEAN members would not only reflect badly on themselves, but would also undermine the bloc's credibility.<sup>9</sup> Yet, such instances of deviation from non-interference remains rare and continues to be the exception rather than the norm.

This elite-driven focus also manifests in how multilateral institutions engage with domestic entities. For example, engagement with the private sector has been welcomed, since economic prosperity benefits the state and enhances regime legitimacy. The ASEAN Business Advisory Council (ASEAN-BAC) and the SCO Business Council were formed to provide a channel for feedback from the private sector. The ASEAN Smart Logistics Network was realised by the ASEAN-BAC and is led by private corporations.<sup>10</sup> The private sector has also been seen as an important source of funding and technological expertise for other projects like the ASEAN Smart Cities Network.<sup>11</sup> In the SCO, Chinese tech companies like Alibaba and the Weidong Cloud Education Group worked closely with the SCO Secretariat to provide digital solutions and distance learning platforms for SCO members during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>12</sup>

Conversely, less effort is placed on engaging with civil society organisations (CSOs). Between 2015 and 2019, only one interface meeting was held between CSO and ASEAN representatives.<sup>13</sup> This disinterest is shown because issues like human rights abuses, corruption and discrimination, which will inevitably be raised, will embarrass the responsible governments and undermine their political legitimacy—something most groupings will prefer to avoid. In any case, the adherence to non-interference means that most groupings lack the mandate to address such issues. Cooperation with CSOs do take place, but are usually in very specific (and self-serving) areas, such as poverty alleviation, humanitarian relief, and rural development.<sup>14</sup> This approach has been referred to as 'selective inclusivity'—a preference to engage with those that support its position, and shun those who criticise.<sup>15</sup>

In terms of engagement with external powers and organisations, regional organisations like ASEAN have established an overlapping framework of institutions throughout Asia. This deepens interdependence with external powers and gives them a stake in the region's stability.<sup>16</sup> It is also a means to socialise major powers into the norms of the region. At the same time, hosting such events allows regional groupings to enhance their relevance and influence. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) for example, comprises 27 member states, and is one of the few regional forums in the world where representatives from the US and North Korea can meet on the sidelines.

Members are often given great flexibility and autonomy in choosing which projects and forums to participate in. Moreover, some of these forums have overlapping areas of cooperation and membership. For example, BIMSTEC is virtually identical to SAARC in terms of objectives, but swaps Pakistan for Thailand. And ASEAN membership overlaps with the MGC and BIMSTEC. This ‘variable geometry’ of organisations and mini-lateral coalitions allows states to ‘forum shop’ for multilateral arrangements that best align with their own interests.<sup>17</sup> This allows for more streamlined discussions and consensus decision-making to tackle complex issues. Yet, this setting could also exacerbate existing fissures and encourage factionalism, making the region more prone to escalation.

## **Challenges facing Asia’s multilateral institutions**

### *A rapidly changing landscape*

The future presents significant challenges for governments in Asia. The rapid pace of technology characterised by the fourth industrial revolution, will lead to increasing job polarisation as low-skilled jobs become automated and demand for digital technology skills grow. Demographic shifts will compound this problem as less developed economies like Myanmar and Laos, will struggle to create employment for their youth bulge. In Southeast Asia, half of the population already fall within the working-age range of 20-54, and this proportion is expected to continue expanding.<sup>18</sup>

While some governments will seek to counter this problem through economic reform and deeper integration with regional markets, others may face domestic pressures to go the other way—towards economic nationalism and protectionism. Signs of disenchantment with free trade has been gradually emerging in Europe, the US and elsewhere; and the US-China trade war and Covid-19 pandemic has reinforced the importance of manufacturing critical items domestically. In Asia, this could easily lead to a weakening of regional groupings as states turn inward and put up trade barriers.

Asian governments face a host of other issues including climate change, disease outbreaks, rising ethnonationalism and religious radicalisation. Managing these problems will require a collective effort that can be organised through existing regional institutions. However, the absence of any effective central governing mechanism means that there is no way to ensure that members will remain committed to meeting agreed targets. Changes in domestic politics for instance, could easily shift a government’s priorities, and some members may choose to drag their feet or completely abdicate their responsibilities. The challenge will be developing the appropriate mechanisms to face these threats that balances the need to ensure support from fellow members without appearing to infringe on their autonomy.

### *Great power influence*

As China’s economic power expands, its influence has been increasingly felt across Asia, creating new friction points with its neighbours. It has demonstrated increasingly assertive behaviour, especially in the South China Sea. As the largest trading partner of virtually every country in Southeast Asia, China has been able to apply a combination of political pressure, economic coercion, and financial inducements against ASEAN members to support its maritime claims. In 2012, Cambodia sided with China instead of its fellow ASEAN members

and blocked the issuing of a joint statement that would have addressed Beijing's assertive behaviour in the South China Sea.<sup>19</sup> This became the first time that ASEAN failed to issue a joint statement at a heads-of-state summit, and demonstrated China's ability to exploit fractures and sow discord within the group.

In addition, the growing rivalry between China and the United States also threatens to undermine Asia's regional stability. America's hub-and-spoke system of alliances has traditionally been seen as a source of security in East Asia and a counterweight to China's burgeoning military strength. However, though some countries like Japan and India have welcomed a tougher stand on Beijing, this view has not been shared by others.

Groupings like ASEAN are particularly concerned due to their close economic and security ties with both superpowers. Washington's use of Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) and 'Indo-Pacific' strategy only received lukewarm responses from ASEAN members, as they were seen to be unnecessarily antagonistic toward China and creating more risks for escalation. This goes against their overall goal of regional stability to support trade and investment. Moreover, growing superpower tensions may place ASEAN members in the difficult position of having to choose between the two, which may exacerbate fractures in the grouping. Indeed, there are already fears that growing disagreements on trade and technology between US and China may lead to economic decoupling and technological bifurcation, creating further geopolitical divisions across Asia.

### *Unresolved disputes*

Despite the 'long peace' in Asia, historical animosities have persisted and territorial disputes continue to divide countries. Some disputes have remained generally peaceful, such as the Malaysia-Philippines dispute over Sabah, and the Japan-South Korea dispute over the Dokdo/Takeshima islands, while others have resulted in violent clashes like the Cambodia-Thailand dispute over Preah Vihear and the recent China-India border clashes. These long-running disputes create a severe trust deficit that impedes deeper regional cooperation and coordination. Over time, they could exacerbate mutual suspicion and raise the risk of misunderstandings and escalations.

Part of this problem has to do with the lack of effective dispute management mechanisms among regional institutions. So long as members continue to seek mediation from external bodies like the ICJ and the UN, it will continue to undermine the relevance and centrality of regional institutions.

## **Recommendations**

### *Strengthen the financial independence of members*

China has emerged as the single largest source of trade, investment, and tourism for many countries in Asia. This has allowed Beijing to use its financial influence to coerce others and get its way. In May 2012, China halted imports of Philippine bananas and other produce over the Scarborough Shoal.<sup>20</sup> In 2017, disagreements with South Korea over the installation of the US-designed Terminal High Altitude Area Defense antimissile system led to a drastic fall in Chinese tourist arrivals and the persecution of the Lotte conglomerate's investments in

China.<sup>21</sup> And as previously mentioned, when China used its financial influence over Cambodia to block the issue of an ASEAN joint statement in 2012. These examples demonstrate how overdependence on a single power can undermine the cohesion of regional institutions.

Steps should therefore be taken to strengthen the financial independence of regional states and reduce overdependence on any single external power. For a start, members could take a more concerted approach toward economic integration with other member states. Indeed, trade within regional institutions has remained relatively low. Intra-regional trade as a proportion of total trade stands at 5% for the SAARC, 5% for the SCO and 23% for ASEAN.<sup>22</sup> Improving intra-regional trade would not only build interdependence and strengthen bilateral relations, but would also contribute to the protection of each state's sovereignty. In addition, institutions could aim to diversify their trade and investment relationships. Negotiations on the EU-ASEAN FTA were suspended in 2009 and the EU has since embarked on bilateral FTAs with several ASEAN members. These bilateral FTAs could lay the groundwork for the eventual region-to-region FTA which will be in the economic interest of both institutions.

Other external institutions like the UN can also play a part. There is a huge demand for infrastructure in Asia. The development of infrastructure for transport, telecommunications, power, and sanitation across the region has been estimated to require investments of \$26 trillion from 2016 to 2030, or around \$1.7 trillion per year.<sup>23</sup> China remains one of the largest sources of infrastructure financing for the region. Though the US has put forward some of its own infrastructure funding initiatives, they pale in comparison to the amounts that China is willing to dole out. The UN could collaborate with regional institutions to set up a fund for infrastructure development, as well as provide relevant expertise. This would reduce the dependence on China by creating alternative sources for financing. Moreover, there are also expectations that the post-Covid economic slowdown will lead Beijing to pull back on overseas infrastructure spending, so this may create a gap that the UN can fill.<sup>24</sup>

### *Expand areas of dialogue and cooperation*

The emphasis on non-interference has been a double-edged sword for Asian institutions. While it protects the sovereignty of members and encourages their participation, it also weakens the institution's ability to address some of the most difficult strategic challenges in the region. Yet, simply institutionalising greater control would just elicit suspicion and pushback from members. Instead, regional institutions should focus efforts on addressing areas of common regional concern, such as managing humanitarian disasters, disease pandemics, transboundary crime and extremism, where members would be more open to cooperative solutions. It is through greater cooperation that members can begin to address their trust deficit.

External organisations like the UN can lend their support to such an approach. The UN has a long track record of cooperation with ASEAN to coordinate humanitarian aid, such as in May 2008 after Cyclone Nargis, and after the Sulawesi earthquake in September 2018. Cooperation can be expanded by institutionalising an arrangement to exchange best practices and provide training. Similar arrangements could also be made with other organisations like

the EU. There is a keen interest among Southeast Asian nations to cooperate with the EU in areas like environmental protection, research and development, and even law enforcement.<sup>25</sup> Specific areas of cooperation and engagement could be tailored based on expertise and requirement. Such exchanges will improve ASEAN's ability to respond to crises, strengthening regional cohesion.

#### *Improve domestic understanding and acceptance of the role of multilateral institutions*

Among Asian communities, there is a general lack of awareness of the role played by multilateral institutions. One reason for this is that governments have a tendency to emphasize their own achievements to their own domestic audiences, and downplay any role played by regional institutions. Yet, as regional politics become more pluralistic, domestic support for regional initiatives will become increasingly vital. For instance, greater economic integration will entail the removal of protectionist measures, and hurt certain sections of the economy. The public needs to be educated to understand that taking on such policies will be painful in the short term, but beneficial to the country in the long run. Utilising civil society, academia, and the media, governments can embark on public information campaigns to raise awareness of the importance of the relevant multilateral groups and the benefits they bring to the state.

#### *A more inclusive Asia will be on Asia's timetable*

Asian institutions are traditionally top-down and elite-driven. However as global norms evolve, these institutions must also adapt so that they do not become disconnected from the needs of their domestic populations. Greater engagement with CSOs will allow governments to have a better insight into grassroots sentiments and prevent such a disconnect, and at the same time, demonstrate to local communities that their voices are being heard. However, CSOs should manage their expectations when engaging with regional institutions. They should be mindful of the norms and limitations of these institutions, and focus on what can be reasonably achieved. This way, discussions can be much more fruitful and meaningful.

Similarly, external organisations must be very careful when broaching sensitive subjects with Asian regional groupings. For example, any discussion on human rights will be viewed through the norm of non-interference. ASEAN and the SCO remain extremely thin-skinned when it comes to criticism on the issue of human rights and will likely not respond positively to calls for collective regional action in response to human rights abuses. That said, Asian institutions have actually made some remarkable progress in the human rights discourse, such as in the areas of women's rights and gender equality.<sup>26</sup> This shows that progress in human rights is possible within Asian organisations, but will take time, and will proceed on a schedule that is acceptable to members, not to outsiders.

#### *A more networked Asia*

The level of diversity in Asia, and its sheer number of long-running disputes and historical animosities have precluded the emergence of a single, centralised regional architecture. Yet,

overcoming many of the region's strategic divisions will nonetheless require greater engagement between the different nations. Sub-regional institutions could work towards a more networked Asian system by focusing on complimentary areas of cooperation and accommodating the different interests and levels of comfort of the various member states.

Such a system would look similar to existing models of Asian institutions. It would be norm-driven, in-line with the broader ideals of the various sub-regional groupings. The structure would be fluid and loose, with a secretariat-like body coordinating the running of cooperative projects as well as communications between the groupings. Unsurprisingly, this system is also likely to inherit some of the problems we see in Asia's sub-regional groupings, such as non-interference preventing a more effective response to domestic crises, and the need to achieve consensus resulting in a diluted response. However, it would also increase the opportunity for dialogue and cooperation between different regions. Notably, a leaders-level summit would need to be in place to ensure that every individual organisation has a voice at the decision-making table and no one's interests are being disregarded.

---

<sup>1</sup> Oliver Stuenkel, "Emerging India: A Farewell to Multilateralism?" *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 8, no. 4 (Oct-Dec 2013): 423

<sup>2</sup> Amrita Narlikar, "India's foreign economic policy under Modi: negotiations and narratives in the WTO and beyond," *International Politics* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00275-z>; see also John Vidal, "India pushes rich countries to boost their climate pledges at Paris," *The Guardian*, 2 December 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/dec/02/india-takes-leading-role-for-global-south-nations-in-climate-talks>

<sup>3</sup> Oliver Stuenkel, "Emerging India: A Farewell to Multilateralism?" *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 8, no. 4 (Oct-Dec 2013): 422-423.

<sup>4</sup> "'No reforms' for ASEAN anytime soon," *The Jakarta Post*, 25 November 2017, [https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2017/11/25/no-reforms-for-asean-anytime-soon.html#:~:text=The%20ASEAN%20Secretariat%20\(ASEC\)%20in,than%201%2C000%20meetings%20every%20year.](https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2017/11/25/no-reforms-for-asean-anytime-soon.html#:~:text=The%20ASEAN%20Secretariat%20(ASEC)%20in,than%201%2C000%20meetings%20every%20year.)

<sup>5</sup> On the 2000 APEC summit in Brunei, see Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 153; and on the 2006 situation with Myanmar, see Bilveer Singh, "ASEAN, Myanmar and the Rohingya Issue," *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies* 18, nos. 1-2 (2014): 17.

<sup>6</sup> This occurred in the dispute over Sabah between Malaysia and the Philippines between 1968 to 1969. See Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 48.

<sup>7</sup> Drew Thompson and Byron Chong, "Built for Trust, Not for Conflict: ASEAN Faces the Future," *United States Institute of Peace* No. 477, p. 8, [https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/20200826-sr\\_477\\_built\\_for\\_trust\\_not\\_for\\_conflict\\_asean\\_faces\\_the\\_future-sr.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/20200826-sr_477_built_for_trust_not_for_conflict_asean_faces_the_future-sr.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Drew Thompson and Byron Chong, "Built for Trust, Not for Conflict: ASEAN Faces the Future," *United States Institute of Peace* No. 477, pp. 9-10,

---

[https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/20200826-sr\\_477\\_built\\_for\\_trust\\_not\\_for\\_conflict\\_asean\\_faces\\_the\\_future-sr.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/20200826-sr_477_built_for_trust_not_for_conflict_asean_faces_the_future-sr.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Sebastian Strangio, "Singapore Joins Calls for Emergency ASEAN Summit on Myanmar," *The Diplomat*, 26 March 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/singapore-joins-calls-for-emergency-asean-summit-on-myanmar/>.

<sup>10</sup> Mindy Tan, "New Asean network to build logistics infrastructure," *The Business Times*, 16 November 2020, <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/asean-business/new-asean-network-to-build-logistics-infrastructure-0>.

<sup>11</sup> "Transcript of Keynote Address and Question and Answer Session by SMS Dr Maliki Osman at the 33rd ASEAN Roundtable 2018 at Raffles City Convention Centre," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore*, 26 November 2018, [https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2018/11/26112018\\_keynote](https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2018/11/26112018_keynote).

<sup>12</sup> Abhishek G Bhaya, "SCO taps into Alibaba for a digital future amid COVID-19 pandemic," *CGTN*, 29 May 2020, [SCO taps into Alibaba for a digital future amid COVID-19 pandemic - CGTN](https://www.cgtn.com/news/SCO-taps-into-Alibaba-for-a-digital-future-amid-COVID-19-pandemic-20200529); and "Weidong Cloud Education together with SCO to fight COVID-19," *Weidong Cloud Education*, 27 March 2020, <https://www.wdecloud.com/newsinfo?id=469>.

<sup>13</sup> Tan Hui Yee, "Asean Summit: Civil society groups meet Asean ministers," *The Straits Times*, 2 November 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/asean-summit-civil-society-groups-meet-asean-ministers>.

<sup>14</sup> See ASEAN Secretariat, "The NGO Profiles: The Second ASEAN Leadership Award on Rural Development and Poverty Eradication," 2015,

<https://www.asean.org/storage/images/2015/November/asean-publication/10.%20October%202015%20-%20ASEAN%20NGO%20Profiles%202015.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Benny The Cheng Guan, "Can ASEAN be really 'people-centered'?" *The Jakarta Post*, 16 August 2017, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2017/08/16/can-asean-be-really-people-centered.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Evelyn Goh, "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies," *International Security* 32, no.3 (Winter 2007/08): 122.

<sup>17</sup> Simon Chesterman, "Asia's Ambivalence about International Law and Institutions: Past, Present and Futures," *The European Journal of International Law* 27, no. 4 (2016): 959.

<sup>18</sup> ASEAN Secretariat, "ASEAN Key Figures 2018," December 2018, 2, [www.aseanstats.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/ASEAN-Key-Figures-2018.pdf](http://www.aseanstats.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/ASEAN-Key-Figures-2018.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Manuel Mogato and Simon Webb, "ASEAN Deadlocked on South China Sea after Cambodia Blocks Statement," *Reuters*, July 24, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-southchinasea-ruling-asean/asean-deadlocked-on-south-china-sea-after-cambodia%20-blocks-statement-idUKKCN1040GT>.

<sup>20</sup> Kesha West, "Banana crisis blamed on Philippines-China dispute," *ABC News*, 29 June 2012, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-06-29/an-banana-exporters-caught-in-philippines-china-dispute/4100422>.

<sup>21</sup> Echo Huang, "China inflicted a world of pain on South Korea in 2017," *Quartz*, 21 December 2017, <https://qz.com/1149663/china-south-korea-relations-in-2017-thaad-backlash-and-the-effect-on-tourism/>.

<sup>22</sup> SAARC figure from Helal Uddin Ahmed, "Transport integration in Eastern South Asia," *The Financial Express*, 7 April 2021, <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/transport-integration-in-eastern-south-asia-1617809778>; SCO figure from "SCO General-Secretary Vladimir Norov addressed the Belt and Road Shanghai forum on promotion of trade in services," *The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*, 9 November 2019,

---

<http://eng.sectesco.org/news/20191109/597820.html>; ASEAN figure from ASEAN Stats, "Intra-Extra ASEAN Trade, by Selected Flows, Reporters & Products 2018," *ASEAN Stats Data Portal*, <https://data.aseanstats.org/dashboard/imts.hs2>.

<sup>23</sup> "Meeting Asia's Infrastructure Needs," *Asian Development Bank*, February 2017, p.5, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/227496/special-report-infrastructure.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Min Ye, "Asia's Near Future? China's New Plans and Implications for East Asia and India," *China-India Brief* #172, 9 December 2020, <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/cag/publications/details/china-india-brief-172>.

<sup>25</sup> Clara Portela, "The perception of the European Union in Southeast Asia: Low priority statuses and selectivity," *Asia Europe Journal* 8, no. 2 (July 2010): 156.

<sup>26</sup> Sebastian von Einsiedel and Anthony Yazaki, "East Asian Perceptions of the UN and Its Role in Peace and Security," *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre*, May 2016, p.12, <https://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/attachment/2211/East-Asian-Perceptions-of-the-UN-and-its-Role-in-Peace-and-Security.pdf>; Vladimir Norov, "SCO countries make great progress in gender equality," *China Daily*, 8 March 2021, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202103/08/WS60458c1ba31024ad0baad8f9.html>.