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Keeping the peace in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the quest for positive peace

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ABSTRACT

Southeast Asia has gone through a remarkable transformation in recent decades and seen peaceful change since the end of the Cold War era despite great power interference and rivalry and ongoing territorial disputes including the South China Sea conflict. The region has transformed its image from the so-called Balkans of the East in the 1960s and 1970s to an economically competitive and peaceful region today. Despite these accomplishments, the record of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in maintaining regional peace and security has also been seriously challenged, particularly at the domestic and transnational level. The paper argues that the Southeast Asian experience of peaceful change calls for a different framework of analysis that goes beyond the traditional International Relations theories which do not provide a compelling answer to whether regional peace has prevailed. It reviews ASEAN's approaches to managing peace and security in Southeast Asia and brings close attention to domestic and international dynamics. The paper claims that the Southeast Asian states' approach to positive peace, reflected in the notion of comprehensive security and the building of national and regional resilience, is instructive in understanding peaceful transformations in the region.

KEYWORDS ASEAN; Southeast Asia; positive peace; comprehensive security; resilience

1. Introduction

Southeast Asia has been one of the peaceful and stable regions in the world – a record it has held in a post-Cold War security environment. A major factor behind this long period of peace is the key role played by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) established in 1967. ASEAN has been viewed as a positive force for peaceful change because of its ability to manage intra-mural relations. The premium placed on regional security has, for all intents and purposes, served as ASEAN's *raison d'être* and has

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defined the nature of ASEAN institutions and mechanisms that have been established over the last five decades. Of particular significance was ASEAN's decision in 2003 to deepen regional integration and work toward the establishment of the ASEAN Community by 2015 nested on three pillars, namely, ASEAN-Political and Security Community (APSC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC).

ASEAN has also been praised for its leadership in building several multi-lateral institutions that bring together most states in the wider Indo-Pacific region to address a range of political, security and economic challenges. These institutions include the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), East Asia Summit (EAS) as well as security frameworks/arrangements like the ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meetings (ADMM) and ADMM Plus.¹ Recently, an achievement of ASEAN has been the successful negotiation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which started in 2012 and was finally signed in November 2020.² RCEP is the world's largest free trade agreement (FTA) accounting for 30 per cent of global GDP and covering 2.2 billion people (Petri & Michael, 2020). The success of ASEAN as a force for peace and an institution builder has earned it its 'centrality' in Asia's vast regional security architecture.

Despite these accomplishments, ASEAN's record in maintaining regional peace and security has been seriously challenged, particularly in the last decade. As ASEAN goes through a period of consequential power transitions in the Indo-Pacific, its ability to manage regional security has drawn mixed responses. With the rising tides of change in the regional and international order, characterized by the heightened tensions and rivalry between major power, questions have been raised on the ability of ASEAN to navigate its position against contending forces and maintain its so-called 'centrality'. This follows on the one hand, from the growing dominance of China within and outside Asia, and the emergence of China-led institutions like the Asian International Infrastructure Bank (AIIB) and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) whose geographic footprint extends beyond Asia. On the other hand, is the concerted effort by the United States (US) to contest the expansion of Chinese power and advance its Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD, also known as the QUAD) initiative, bringing in Japan, India, and Australia, which ostensibly aims to contain China's influence. These developments have had a destabilizing impact on Asia's regional order and on ASEAN—with the latter having had to confront the question of being made to choose which major power to bandwagon or hedge against. Aside from major power dynamics, the region is also facing an increasing number of transnational security threats such as climate change and infectious diseases like the COVID-19 pandemic that endanger people's well-being and security and severely challenge the capacity of ASEAN states to respond.

Against this background, the objectives of this paper are two-fold. First, it reviews ASEAN's experience in managing peace and security in Southeast Asia and examines how this has been explained from the lens of three theoretical schools of international relations: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. The discussion then moves to extend the conceptual analysis beyond the mainstream IR approaches to apply the framework of positive peace as an alternative approach to explain how Southeast Asian states manage domestic conflicts by promoting security practices that are aligned with the elements found in the positive peace framework, particularly the emphasis on addressing structural violence caused by poverty and underdevelopment, exclusion, and injustice. It brings into focus the notions of comprehensive security and national resilience as defining ideas that shape regional security practices and meets the objectives of positive peace. In doing so, the analysis also highlights the salience of domestic forces in shaping ASEAN's policy choices, underscoring the relationship between the domestic and the international that is often overlooked in explaining ASEAN's approaches to regional peace and security.

Second, given the strong influence of domestic forces in the positive peace approach, the paper scrutinises how these factors affects the ability of ASEAN to work collectively as it 'struggles' to remain fit-for-purpose in a remarkably different security environment. It discusses the tensions in dealing with internal/domestic problems against 'new' regional challenges and the need for ASEAN member states to work together and mount effective responses to regional threats. These domestic considerations further help in understanding the enduring feature of the *ASEAN way*, characterised by informality, consensus, and consultation versus the more legalistic and formal modes of security governance.

We set forth two arguments in this paper. First, we argue that the nature of regional security practices/processes adopted by ASEAN and the kinds of mechanisms that have been established to manage security challenges are largely informed by internal/domestic politics rather than aspirations of regional community and identity building. In this regard, we offer an alternative approach of positive peace to mainstream IR explanations of regionalism and regional order and bring more attention to the dynamics of 'intermestic' (international- domestic) politics. We posit that addressing the persistent domestic challenges of achieving sustainable economic development, maintaining social cohesion, and dealing with the different threats to human security remain the main preoccupation of states and are considered critical not only in avoiding interstate conflict but in achieving positive peace. Thus, ASEAN's Political-Security community very much remains a work in progress as member states continue to manage the difficult balance of having to deal with internal problems and putting up a collective

response to regional issues. It is these intermestic dynamics that led ASEAN to pursue an eclectic approach to keeping regional peace, taking what works from the three approaches of realism, liberalism and constructivism and combining these with the positive peace approach that integrates the ideas of comprehensive security and national resilience.

Second, we argue that while much of the ASEAN security practices have worked over the years, the kinds of crises currently facing the region may render them ineffective. Transnational security threats like climate change and global pandemics are compelling reasons why ASEAN needs to re-think its approaches and recalibrate its mechanisms to be better equipped to handle 21st century challenges. Moreover, as ASEAN deals with the repercussions of the Myanmar crisis, responds to an increasingly aggressive China and navigates the heightened rivalry between the US and China, a negotiated *ASEAN way*, imbued with the elements of positive peace and national/regional resilience, could be a way for ASEAN to stay relevant and maintain its 'centrality' in a rapidly changing international environment.

2. Peaceful change: locating ASEAN's approaches to peace and security from building a 'zone of peace' to a nascent 'security community'

We start this section with a brief review of the concept of peaceful change and how the intersubjective understanding of this concept informs ASEAN's approach to peace and security. In understanding peaceful change, one cannot often assume that change—which indicates the transition from one state of affairs to another—can be peaceful. Peaceful change occurs when over the course of transitions in the global and/or regional political and security environment, there is no violence or outbreak of war.

Classical IR theorist like E. H. Carr and Robert Gilpin define peaceful change to mean non-violent shifts in power or 'change in status quo without war' (Carr, 1964; Gilpin, 1981). The means toward peaceful change cover a range of strategies and mechanisms. These include through statecraft, application of international law, institution building, negotiation and conflict resolution, peacekeeping and peacebuilding, and collective security including alliance building (Paul, 2020).

T.V. Paul, in this special issue, defines peaceful change as a 'continuum along a minimalist and maximalist spectrum from cold peace to regular peace and warm peace' (Paul, forthcoming). Paul draws on Benjamin Miller's classification of different types of peace applied to a regional context, wherein *cold* peace is a condition where conflicts are reduced but not resolved (Miller, 2007:12) while *warm* peace occurs 'when parties share expectations that no resort to armed violence is possible in the foreseeable

future under any circumstances, including government change in any of the states or a change in the international setting" (Miller, 2007: 46-47).

The transition from *cold* to *warm* peace has been a key feature in the notion of security communities (Deutsch et al., 1957). As relations among regional states deepen through high levels of transactions and interaction, the development of norms and the building of the 'we feeling', the expectation of peaceful change is sustained by the idea that no state will resort to war or use force to resolve differences (Deutsch et al., 1957).

Akin to the notion of the absence of violence and war is the notion of negative peace as advanced in the peace studies literature. Johan Galtung's analytical framework of 2-sided peace - negative and positive peace, with the former denoting the 'absence of violence' and the latter indicating the absence of structural violence based on the attainment of social justice (Galtung, 1969), finds convergence with ideas of peaceful change in IR and its subfield of security studies. And while peace studies is often viewed as a normative discipline given its focus on values such as non-violence and justice to steer change in a positive direction, the mechanisms and approaches promoted in this field are similar with the same objective of achieving peaceful change.

2.1. From building a 'zone of peace' to a nascent 'security community'

Many of the notions discussed above on peaceful change are reflected in ASEAN's approaches to peace and security in Southeast Asia during several periods of its history. In its earlier years, the priority was to build peace in the region—i.e., avoidance of violence and to manage interstate conflicts, notably between Malaysia and Indonesia and Malaysia and the Philippines. This was to be achieved with the establishment of ASEAN in 1967. Its member states spent the first decade of peaceful transformation agreeing to end bilateral disputes and working toward regional reconciliation. As noted by scholars like Michael Leifer, the creation of ASEAN provided its member states with a regional mechanism to prevent and manage intramural conflicts (Leifer, 1989).

Through ASEAN, member states generated a set of regional norms and practices that defined the nature of interstate relations initially within the grouping but later extended to neighbouring states that were then not members of ASEAN (Alagappa, 1995; Acharya, 2001; Caballero-Anthony, 2010). ASEAN adopted the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which encapsulated a set of regional norms to manage interstate relations and regional conflicts. To enable ASEAN to cope with the ideological divide of the Cold War strategic environment, member states also adopted the Zone

of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) Declaration in 1971. ZOPFAN was essentially an iteration of the fundamental ideals and aspirations of ASEAN, centred around the non-interference of external powers in the domestic and regional affairs of Southeast Asian states (Hanggi, 1991; Emmers, 2018). Since then, the ASEAN experience of managing regional peace and security has become a thoughtful calibration of approaches that are aimed at achieving a dynamic equilibrium of endogenous and external factors that continue to shape the security environment in Southeast Asia.

In the post-Cold War era, the ASEAN narrative of peaceful change has been explained by the different schools of thought in IR – realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Realists perceive the San Francisco system that links the United States to its regional allies in the Asia-Pacific as the main source of stability in the wider region. The significance of regional institutions from a realist perspective is thus limited and ultimately restricted to basic instruments available to states to take part in the play of power politics. The realist interpretation of regional multilateralism therefore focuses on power politics and tends to minimise the importance of norms and principles and the possible long-term convergence of interests. Cooperative arrangements between states are expected to survive only for as long as the great powers consider them to be in their interest (Mearsheimer, 1995). Hence, realists who have studied Southeast Asian affairs view the role of ASEAN as a reflection of its members' calculations of their respective national interests and therefore remain skeptical about ASEAN's role in formulating and sustaining peace in the region (Leifer, 1996; Beeson, 2009).

While recognising the realist emphasis on competition for material power and state interests, liberalism offers a more positive view of how material factors that define interstate relations can be managed. Following the Kantian theory of peace, liberalism is founded on three pillars that allow for a more optimistic view of international relations. First is the importance of international trade, which generates economic interdependence among states and makes conflicts or wars costly. Second is the presence of liberal democratic political systems, which minimize the incidence of conflicts given that democracies are much less likely to go to war against each other. And third is the development of international institutions and rules, which constitute regulatory regimes that manage interstate disputes and allow for the peaceful settlement of conflicts (Rosecrance, 1986; Keohane and Martin, 1995; Russett and Oneal, 2001).

In applying liberalism to the region, the argument that liberal democracies never go to war or seldom fight has been given little credence, since even in the post-Cold War era, most of the governments in ASEAN are not liberal democracies. Yet despite this fact, the incidence of interstate conflicts has been minimal. One could also argue that ASEAN's successful

record in preventing conflicts since its inception in 1967 and the development of regional norms and structures to prevent conflict evolved despite the paucity of liberal democratic regimes in the region (Caballero-Anthony, 2010).

However, compared with the realist perspective, the liberal emphasis on the importance of international institutions may offer a better approach to understanding peaceful change in Southeast Asia as it helps explain the politics of cooperation, especially in international trade. Analysts who study Southeast Asian regionalism note, for example, the benefits of increased economic cooperation through the development of the ASEAN Free Trade Arrangement (AFTA) in 1992 and a push toward the creation of an ASEAN Economic Community in 2015 (Nesadurai, 2003; Chia & Plummer, 2015). Yet the central liberal argument that economic incentives bring about deeper economic integration, which eventually spills over to closer political cooperation, seems rather unconvincing in the context of Southeast Asia. Indeed, liberalism provides limited insights in explaining the slow implementation of the ASEAN Economic Community and its low level of institutionalisation overall (Basu Das et al., 2013). Despite their official commitment to lowering trade and investment barriers, the ASEAN countries continue to impose high levels of nontariff barriers, and the regional body is still far from achieving its goals of establishing a single market and a common production base. Moreover, the spill over argument of economic interdependence leading to regulatory regimes, norms and institutions for peaceful change has not yet materialized in the ASEAN context.

In contrast to realism and liberalism and their primary focus on material factors, constructivists argue that the distribution of power and other material factors like trade and investment have had only a minimal impact on Southeast Asian states and their ability to maintain peace and stability in the region (Wendt, 1992; Hopf, 1998). For constructivists, ASEAN and its exercise of conflict avoidance is generally credited with the absence of sustained interstate conflict. ASEAN is viewed as a successful instrument to avoid the recurrence of conflict and improve the climate of interstate relations in Southeast Asia. Constructivists highlight ASEAN's reliance on dialogue and consultation, the practice of consensus and self-restraint, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and the principles of national sovereignty and non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states to prevent interstate disputes from escalating into open conflict. An ongoing debate among constructivist scholars is whether ASEAN constitutes an example of a security community. Acharya (2014: 254-255) argues that 'regional cooperation was undertaken in the absence of high levels of functional interdependence or interaction' and that the regional institution had evolved as 'a sort of an "imagined community", despite low initial levels of

interactions and transactions, and the existence of substantial political and situational differences among its members.'

Overall, constructivists have provided insights into understanding the evolving peaceful order in Southeast Asia since the end of the Cold War period by focusing on how states have construed the issue of anarchy through regionalism and cooperation. Constructivism has helped explain the evolution of ASEAN since its establishment in 1967 by identifying and paying close attention to the role of norms such as non-interference in the affairs of other states and collective identities of modern statehood (Acharya, 2001). Constructivists have emphasised the positive aspects of the *ASEAN way* and placed emphasis on its normative constraints on Southeast Asian states (Caballero-Anthony, 2005; Glas, 2017). Regional relations are regulated by the routine of cooperation and a policy of accommodation, engagement, and consensus decision-making (Haacke, 2003). In short, Tan notes that despite the disparity in geographical size, economic power, and influence that has existed between ASEAN members, the ASEAN model of cooperation has worked until now to promote peace and stability in Southeast Asia (Tan, 2011).

Nevertheless, constructivists are often criticised for underestimating the problem of anarchy and the importance of relative gains and the distribution of power when discussing ASEAN and the shared sense of belonging to a community. Constructivists are said to pay insufficient attention to ongoing sources of mistrust and conflict that continue to linger between the ASEAN members and that may still lead to conflict, as well as the changing nature of politics in the region brought on by political transitions in the Southeast Asian states. Related to this point, constructivists are often criticised for over-estimating the notion of regional identity in Southeast Asia while exploring ASEAN at the expense of enduring national identities and the notion of nationalism. The latter framed in opposition to other states can severely undermine the creation of a security community despite repeated attempts at interstate cooperation.

Despite their shortcomings, the existing literature on ASEAN and its contribution to peace and security in Southeast Asia continues to privilege the IR approaches of realism, liberalism, and constructivism. While these approaches help explain how ASEAN has kept the peace, we argue for the need to go beyond stove-piped explanations limited to debates across the conventional IR schools and instead encourage a more eclectic approach. Such an approach is informed by the security practices that have been adopted by the ASEAN member states which are often understudied in the current literature. Moreover, in analysing ASEAN's eclectic approach, we draw out several elements found in the positive peace framework which, as we argue below, not only elucidates further the need to go beyond the

3-isms of IR but also helps explain ASEAN's nimble approach to use whatever means available to further its objectives of maintaining regional peace and security. These include calibrating the *ASEAN way*, inculcating a shared understanding of comprehensive security, and sustaining regional resilience.

3. Going beyond the 3-isms and the quest for positive peace

A major observation when analysing the history of managing peace and security in Southeast Asia is how Southeast Asian states have deftly adopted a combination of strategies that have the elements of the realist, liberalist, and constructivist approaches in the conduct of interstate relations to maintain regional order. Arguably, ASEAN's overall approach is eclectic and, as pointed out by Muthiah Alagappa (2011), it is often hard to pin down which of the strategies is preferred given that both power balancing and engagement behaviour can and have co-existed. Thus, approaches to regional peace can be shown as somewhere between balance of power and regional community building, with the relevant institutional and normative attributes including the *ASEAN way*.

When studying ASEAN's modalities, one observes that the member states still give much emphasis to the *ASEAN way* when seeking to maintain regional security despite having an ASEAN Charter and the adoption of the ASEAN political-security community that are meant to ensure a rules-based form of engagement. In times of crises, this normative framework of informality, non-interference and consensus-based decision making has been an enduring feature in ASEAN's approaches to peace and security. Rather than viewed as an impediment to collective and decisive action, much time is given to individual states to address and resolve issues of national concern before any regional action might be taken. These internal crises include societal conflicts, separatism, and extremism whose root causes include social injustice, discrimination, and marginalization.

Still, the *ASEAN way* as a form of diplomatic interaction has often been criticised to be overly reliant on consensus building leading to inaction and an inability to solve sources of conflict and address controversial issues where clashing interests cannot be avoided (Henderson, 1999; Nischalke Ingo, 2000; Rüländ, 2000). It is unable to solve sources of conflict and is ill equipped to deal with pressing matters. The *ASEAN way* is highly dependent on the narrowly defined interests of the member states, and it is based on a decentralized and loosely coordinated framework of cooperation. Hence, the *ASEAN way* is dominated by national interests that take precedence in case of disagreements. The constant search for consensus and solidarity can be observed as a sign of weakness as it prevents discussions on

more tangible or sensitive issues. ASEAN has also attempted to extend geographically the *ASEAN way* and its approach to conflict management through the establishment of the ARF. This has involved transmitting to the Asia-Pacific norms and principles, an informal process of dialogue and consultation but also a mode of conflict avoidance and management developed since 1967. ASEAN has promoted within the ARF its own practices of self-restraint and consensus building and favoured an informal security dialogue over legally binding confidence measures. Yet the applicability of the ASEAN approach to the management of complex security flashpoints like the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan question remains highly questionable. Likewise, rising competition between the great powers driven by ideological differences and divergent security interests and strategic perspectives cannot be ignored in an *ASEAN way* (Garofano, 2002; Emmers, 2003).

3.1. The ASEAN way and the imperatives of dealing with domestic conflicts

While building an ASEAN 3-pillared community is a positive trajectory for Southeast Asian regionalism, the need to deal with domestic challenges of long-drawn internal conflicts remains critical. Throughout ASEAN's history, one observes that despite the peaceful interstate environment in Southeast Asia, countries like Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Myanmar have been plagued with decades-long internal conflicts. These conflicts find their roots on issues of social injustice, discrimination, and marginalisation (Callahan, 2003; Hsueh, 2016; Oishi, 2016). Such domestic conflicts cannot be addressed effectively through the *ASEAN way* and its narrow reading of national interests and its reliance on consensus building. Some of these conflicts are highlighted below:

3.1.1. Thailand

The restiveness in the country's southern provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala are borne out of the desire for these provinces to secede from Thailand. Three quarters of the population in the Thailand's deep south are Malay Muslims in this predominantly Buddhist country. This conflict has simmered since the late 1940s and was caused by the strict assimilation policy of the Thai government which attempted to replace the Malay heritage with Thai language and culture. This policy was met with violent resistance and while the policy has been adjusted in response to local concerns, the reluctance by the Thai government to recognise the importance of Malay language and culture has fuelled this conflict up to present times (Vatikiotis, 2003).

Since 2004, this insurgency has killed thousands of civilians and injured approximately 13,500 people. The largest rebel group is the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), which is a Malay separatist group. Recent peace-building efforts started by the Thai government since 2015 have suffered from fits and starts. Negotiations have also been hampered by issues of legitimacy. The Thai government has been engaging the MARA Patani, an umbrella body that represent multiple rebel factions. The BRN, however, has refused to join and insisted that it is not part of the negotiation process (International Crisis Group, 2020).

3.1.2. Indonesia

Like Thailand, Indonesia has had a long separatist conflict in West Papua. The conflict started in 1969 when Indonesia annexed West Papua through the Act of Free Choice, which was considered illegitimate by most Papuans (Rabasa & John, 2002). Most of the inhabitant in the province are Melanesians and speak some 1,000 distinct languages. They have long shared the vision of a 'Papua Merdeka' – which means an 'independent, peaceful and justly governed Papua' (Webb-Gannon, 2014). Papua, also known as Irian Jaya, is rich in natural resources, with gold, copper, and other minerals, as well as large gas and oil deposits (Rabasa & John, 2002). West Papuan leaders have long complained about how Indonesia has deprived them of civil, political, economic, and social rights for the past 50 years. The Free Papua Organisation, which is a tribal group, has contributed to the low-intensity insurgency over the years.

West Papua's current conflict and humanitarian crisis erupted in December 2018 in Nduga regency in the central highlands displacing over 40,000 civilians who sought refuge in the mountains and vast forests. Many have since resided in temporary refugee camps, not yet recognised as internally displaced people by the Indonesian state, which does not acknowledge the conflict as a 'conflict' at all (Lundstrom, 2020). Recently, the United Liberation Movement for West Papua, a pro-independence coalition, announced the formation of a 'provisional government' on 1 December 2020. This move has seen an increase in military presence in the province and crack down on independence activists. On 29 April 2021, the Indonesian government officially designated the West Papua National Liberation Army, an armed separatist group, as a terrorist organisation following the killing of an Indonesian military general in an ambush.

3.1.3. Extremist/terror movements in Sulawesi

Besides the problem of secession, Indonesia has had to deal with extremist and terrorist threats. The district of Poso (Central Sulawesi) was at the center of brutal conflicts between radical Christians and Muslims between 1999 and 2001. The 'Poso riots', as they are defined, became even more violent

after Indonesian jihadist groups, who were fighting in the Philippines, joined Muslim groups in Sulawesi. These formed the group that chose the name of East Indonesia Mujahidin (MIT). The ethnic-religious clashes officially ended with the signing of the Malino Accords in 2001 and 2002, but the region has remained plagued by terrorist activity to this day. MIT is currently aligned with the Islamic State (Hariyadi, 2020). Poso has been symbolic to the violent extremist movement, and it has moved from communal violence to locally inspired terrorism. It is the only place in Indonesia where extremists could ever plausibly claim to control territory (IPAC, 2020).

3.1.4. Philippines

The Philippines has for decades been dealing with the problems of communist warfare and secession waged by Muslim separatist groups in its southern provinces. The Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army (CPP-NPA) has been waging a guerrilla war since 1969 to overthrow the Philippine government and establish a communist state. As such, the Philippines now has the world's longest-running communist insurgency. Socio-economic causes, such as failed agrarian reform, poor labor practices, and economic inequalities were the catalysts for the conflict. The movement remains within the capabilities of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and law enforcement to manage the conflict. Forging a peace agreement with the CPP-NPA was one of Philippine President Duterte's campaign promises. Yet he abandoned the talks and claimed that he had grown tired of the insincerity of the communist rebels. The Duterte administration and the military vowed to end the rebellion by 2022. However, there is still no end in sight for the communist rebellion with root causes of the rebellion in poor provinces and towns remaining intractable (Hondrada Gabriel, 2020).

Meanwhile, the secessionist movements are a decades-old problem. Since 1969, there has been an active conflict in Mindanao between the Philippine government, Moro Muslim groups, and other armed groups. The prospects of a peace deal seemed possible after the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in March 2019, but sporadic violence – related to the exclusion of armed groups from the peace process – has continued across Mindanao to this day. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Philippine government signed the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) in 2012 and the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) in 2014—both leading to the creation of the newly-established Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) where MILF officials and combatants were appointed as governing officials through the Bangsamoro Transition Authority. MILF Chair Al Haj Murad serves as the region's chief minister. The

first challenge the MILF must address now is its lack of governing experience (Mindanao People's Caucus, 2020).

Despite the peace agreement with the MILF, sporadic armed conflicts and violence are common in Mindanao provinces, where clashes between the Philippine military and IS-inspired extremist armed groups occur frequently. These armed groups still wage rebellion or terror attacks, as they do not subscribe to the peace agreement while embracing extremist ideologies from the Islamic State. For instance, the siege of Marawi city in 2017, a five-month battle between pro-Islamic State fighters and the Philippine military, destroyed much of the city and displaced 400,000 people from Marawi and nearby towns. In the first half of 2020, there were 66,000 new displacements due to the conflicts in Mindanao. Other sources of conflict include clan wars and land disputes as well as the presence of private armed groups affiliated with local political dynasties (Inquirer, 2021).

3.1.5. Myanmar

Myanmar is home to some of the longest-running armed conflicts in the world, some dating back more than 70 years and others more recent in origin. Today, there are some twenty 'ethnic armed groups' that have political and military wings. Their stated objective is some form of greater autonomy for their community.

The country's military, known as the Tatmadaw, has faced long-term insurgencies across a significant proportion of the country, in areas inhabited by minority communities that view it as an occupying enemy force. The armed groups are well positioned to profit from the illicit economy that has developed over decades in these areas, which produces the revenues necessary for arming and operating a powerful militia. With so many different ethnic armed groups, and with the state and Tatmadaw unable to provide security in much of the periphery, many ethnic communities have raised armed militias out of necessity to protect themselves from rival ethnic communities.

Fierce fighting between the Tatmadaw and Arakan Army in Rakhine and southern Chin States since late 2018 has had a significant impact on civilians, with non-government sources estimating up to 200,000 displaced and hundreds killed. Events in Rakhine State underline not only how rising ethno-nationalism is a conflict driver, but also how the Tatmadaw's inability to protect minority groups in conflict-affected areas can lead to the creation of new armed forces, such as militias or ethnic armed groups (International Crisis Group, 2020).

The 2021 Myanmar military coup was partly driven by an emerging alliance of Myanmar ethnic groups against the Tatmadaw. The Peace Process Steering Team (PPST) which initially brought together the ten ethnic armed

organisations (EAOs) that have signed the 2015 nationwide ceasefire agreement (NCA), reportedly reached out to signatory and non-signatory groups with the intention of forming a coalition against the military junta (Myanmar Now, 2021). The narrative of not being able to protect ethnic minority groups was further reinforced when Catholic nun sister Ann Rose Nu Twang became a symbol for Myanmar's resistance movement. The picture of her kneeling down in front of Myanmar's security forces pleading them to aim at her rather than unarmed Kachin minority demonstrators went viral (Cabot, 2021). Open calls for recruitment by ethnic rebel groups like the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) were met with enthusiasm. *Frontier Myanmar* reported that an influx of people, mostly youths, joined the KIA following the military coup (Fishbein et al., 2021). Pro-democracy activists have expressed support for the Karen National Union (KNU) and the KIA since the fights began in Kachin, Karen, and Shan States (The Irrawaddy, 2021). Approximately 12,000 people were displaced by the military junta's continuous air strikes following KNU seizure of the military base (The Straits Times, 2021). The collaboration between EAOs and anti-coup protesters against the military junta spells the prospect of transforming the country into a state of civil war.

In sum, the consequences of these internal conflicts in Southeast Asia are a constant reminder of the need to adopt a comprehensive approach to security if regional peace and security is to be maintained. It has been a source of concern among ASEAN leaders and officials that the different internal conflicts in Southeast Asia could rapidly escalate and spill over to neighbouring states, and consequently threaten regional security (Kramer, 2010). The presence of unresolved and simmering internal conflicts underscores the point that peaceful societies are integral to peaceful change (Fry & Kemp, 2004).

3.2. Reclaiming ASEAN's ideas on comprehensive security and national/regional resilience

Since its establishment in 1967, the idea of 'keeping the peace from within' has been fundamental to ASEAN's thinking on how member states can maintain peace and security in Southeast Asia. To have a peaceful and stable environment at the national level, the notions of comprehensive security and national/regional resilience must be internalised by all the ASEAN states. The discussion above describing a series of ongoing domestic conflicts in Southeast Asia indicate that this objective has not yet been achieved.

According to Muthiah Alagappa, the concept of comprehensive security had been the organising concept of security in Southeast Asia, particularly during the formative years of ASEAN from the late 1970s to the early 1990s.

Unlike the conventional notion of security, which focuses mainly on defending state borders from military attack, comprehensive security is a much broader conceptualisation of security that '[goes] beyond (but does not exclude) the military threats to embrace the political, economic and socio-cultural dimensions' (Alagappa, 1988, p. 624). To illustrate this thinking, Alagappa quotes former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed who declared that 'national security was inseparable from political stability, economic success and social harmony. Without these, all the guns in the world cannot prevent a country from being overcome by its enemies, whose ambitions can be fulfilled, sometimes without firing a shot' (Alagappa, 1988, p. 624).

A similar formulation of comprehensive security is found in the concept of 'total defence' in other ASEAN countries like Singapore and Thailand. Jawhar Hassan, another well-known Asia security analyst, further argued that the ASEAN region has always regarded security as multi-dimensional and comprehensive in nature (Hassan, 1995). Yet while comprehensive security indeed offers a broader conceptualisation of security, it is state-centric in nature where the referent of security is the state with less or no attention given to the security concerns of individuals and communities. In fact, several studies on security in Asia have shown that comprehensive security had for a long time been associated with the notion of regime security (Alagappa, 1998).

Regional resilience, on the other hand, can be seen as a foundation for and a means to achieve comprehensive security. The seamless relationship between comprehensive security and regional resilience is encapsulated in the Indonesian notion of '*ketahanan nasional*' (national resilience), which is defined as 'the ability of a nation to cope with, endure and survive any kind of challenges or threats in the course of a struggle to achieve national goals'. According to Indonesian scholar Dewi Fortuna Anwar, national resilience is built on the foundations of: (1) economic development, and (2) a need to avoid involvement in international ideological confrontation (Anwar, 2006, pp. 82–83). Although national resilience is characteristically inward-looking and nationalistic in orientation, its application at the regional level retains much of the focus on economic development and a 'non-aligned' stance towards major power competition while promoting and fostering closer regional cooperation. National and regional resilience also underscores the need for Southeast Asian states to rely on its own capacities and strengths to be secure without having to rely on outside powers to provide their security.

In brief, the twin concepts of comprehensive security and regional resilience defined the conduct of intra-regional political and security relations and cooperation in ASEAN in its early years. They continue to be relevant

when seeking to understand the current ASEAN security framework. Put simply, the latter can be understood as follows: for regional security to be maintained, the region must be resilient. This resilience starts with each ASEAN member state and to achieve resilience at the national level requires having a strong economic foundation and a foreign policy that it not aligned with any major external power. Indeed, this security framework is clearly reflected in many of ASEAN's official documents and declarations since its establishment until its most recent ASEAN Vision 2025 documents. These include the Bangkok Declaration (1967), ASEAN's Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN. , 1971), ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC., 1976), The Bali Concord I (1976), Bali Concord II (2003), and Bali Concord III (2011). In all these declarations, the need for member states to focus on domestic affairs is viewed as critical in maintaining a stable regional environment. Further, this internal stability is regarded as important to prevent external interference from other states within and outside the region.

3.3. Finding convergence between positive peace, comprehensive security and regional resilience

As an approach to managing regional peace and security, ASEAN's emphases on comprehensive security and national/regional resilience resonate well with Johan Galtung's framework of negative and positive peace. Arguably, the latter presents a more comprehensive approach to peace and security that recognises the importance of engendering social justice to prevent violence (Galtung, p. 185). When applied to the ASEAN context, this means that achieving social justice through economic development helps promote political stability and social harmony, and these in turn prevent conflict and violence. For developing countries that have multi-ethnic societies, economic development and societal harmony have been critical elements in building national and regional resilience.

Unlike the concept of security community that denotes the absence of war or interstate conflict (Deutsch et al., 1957) and is often associated with ASEAN, the means towards achieving positive peace via economic development has always been an integral part of ASEAN's peacebuilding strategies. The thinking has been that economic growth helps address structural issues like poverty, inequality, and exclusion. In other words, while security community is founded on a collective identity and shared norms at an interstate level among member states (Adler & Barnett, 1998; Acharya, 2001), the efforts of building positive peace are largely done at the domestic level. And, while one can contend that there are multiple and multi-level pathways to peace, the focus on a national dimension recognises the important

influence that domestic factors have on foreign policy decisions taken by states at the regional and international level.

This explains why in ASEAN's approach to building a 3-pillared ASEAN Community, the economic and socio-cultural pillars are inseparable from the political-security community, underscoring the conscious effort taken by member states to present a comprehensive pathway to maintaining peaceful change in Southeast Asia. Within the context of ASEAN's ambitious goal to establish a political and security community (APSC), one notes that the regional body has often used phrases like 'inclusive, people-centered and resilient community', 'freedoms and social justice', and 'a safe and secure environment' (APSC., 2019). From this framing, one can argue that the current thinking on achieving peaceful change in Southeast Asia goes beyond the constructivists' notions of security community and regional identity and the realists' stance on alliance building and power balancing. While there may be realist, liberalist and constructivist elements found in ASEAN's approach to peace, what is missing and must be included in the analysis is the criticality of domestic challenges, making the journey to positive peace start from the inside out in a sustainable way.

3.4. From negative peace to positive peace

Notwithstanding the imperatives of managing internal conflicts from becoming regional threats, there has also been the imperative of achieving positive peace through economic development and social justice. In this regard, one can argue that the normative preference for observing the *ASEAN way* is serving that purpose. A noted scholar once quipped that after the five Southeast Asian nations (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) signed the Bangkok Declaration in 1967 to establish ASEAN and agreed not to fight, they 'forgot' about the regional body and focused on nation building and economic development (Anwar, 1995). Thus, the *ASEAN way* of strict adherence to the principles of non-intervention and sovereignty was more than instrumental in giving Southeast Asian states the space to deal with their domestic problems. Especially during the formative years of ASEAN (1967-late 1980s), the paramount national security concerns were to react to the threats of communism and secessionism, as well as addressing issues of poverty, marginalisation, and ethnic tensions, exacerbated by low economic growth. It was not until the early 1990s when economic progress became more visible that economic regionalism appeared as an objective, and which led ASEAN to initiate the idea of an ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 1992. As we fast-forward to the present, one can note the significant rise in GDP per capita in most Southeast Asian states. See [Table 1](#) below. Arguably, the impressive GDP growth was largely

Table 1. GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international \$).

Country name	1990	2000	2019
Brunei Darussalam	71,231	69,023	62,100
Cambodia	..	1,491	4,389
Indonesia	4,533	5,689	11,812
Lao PDR	1,965	2,861	7,826
Malaysia	10,306	15,917	28,364
Myanmar	620	1,094	5,142
Philippines	4,232	4,454	8,908
Singapore	37,348	56,011	97,341
Thailand	7,109	9,819	18,460
Vietnam	1,673	2,955	8,041

Source: World Bank (2021). World Development Indicators Databank. Accessed 30 April, 2021.

due to the focus given by ASEAN states to domestic challenges and improving economic prospect, consequently leading ASEAN to embark in 2003 on a more ambitious goal of establishing an AEC by 2015 (ASEAN, 2012).

Given this approach, it is not surprising that security challenges and internal conflicts receive less attention, not to mention the fact that consensus needs to be achieved first before a regional statement can be adopted and implemented. Hence, when the East Timor crisis happened in 1999, ASEAN's response was missing, and regional actions were either late or weak. Similar examples of inaction could be observed during other crises like the Saffron Revolution in Myanmar in 2007, and subsequent crises in the Rakhine state in 2015 and 2017. There is also the ongoing inability of ASEAN to come up with a strong collective reaction to China with regards to its aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea (SCS). ASEAN members have been split over the dispute partly due to China's deepening economic and diplomatic ties with individual member states. China's increasing influence over some members especially in economic terms and their willingness to endorse Beijing's preferences as a result was illustrated by ASEAN's failure to issue a joint communiqué at the end of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in July 2012. The Philippines had insisted on a reference to the incident between Manila and Beijing at Scarborough Shoal earlier in 2012 but Cambodia, the ASEAN chair at the time, refused on the grounds that the territorial disputes with China are bilateral. Likewise, ASEAN's 2016 official statement made no mention of The Hague ruling on the rejection of Chinese territorial claims in the SCS due to the lack of consensus among all the ten ASEAN member states (The Straits Times, 2016).

4. Re-negotiating the ASEAN way for sustainable peace

As member states in ASEAN negotiate domestic pressures with the need for regional action, the demands for more effective and robust regional responses have increased given the current challenges facing the region. The issues requiring collective action range from having to deal with

territorial disputes in the South China Sea, managing the increasing tensions between the US and China, and responding to the current crises in Myanmar triggered by the military coup in February 2021 that had led to country-wide demonstrations, violence against civilians meted out by the military and the death of over at least 700 people including women and children.

Compounding these challenges are the growing risks of climate change that have already caused several devastating natural disasters in many ASEAN states.³ This agenda is particularly critical to ASEAN since it has studied that between 2004-2014, more than half of the total global disaster mortality was in Southeast Asia, that is, 354,000 of the 700,000 total death in disasters worldwide (Caballero-Anthony, 2017; AHA Armor, 2020). It is also estimated that about 191 million people have been displaced and rendered homeless (either temporarily or permanently) due to disasters, affecting a total of 193 million people. This meant that one in three to four people in the region had experienced different types of losses to property and life (ADB, 2013).

Climate change is already threatening to reverse economic growth and development gains achieved over the past few decades. The resulting problems threaten to undermine social cohesion and governmental legitimacy and destabilise already fragile regions in Southeast Asia. Climate change creates additional demand for state services, for example in terms of disaster assistance in the aftermath of storms, food aid, and safe management of displacement. When unmet, these needs can compound pre-existing grievances over inequality, political marginalization, and unresponsive governments. The consequences can aggravate and prolong conflicts and make it harder to achieve and sustain peace.

Dealing with the cross-cutting impact of climate change such as catastrophic disasters entail stronger regional cooperation in providing different types of assistance to displaced communities in affected ASEAN countries, like providing shelter to internally displaced populations and climate induced-refugees (Caballero-Anthony, 2018; Cook & Yogendran, 2020). More is therefore expected of ASEAN to work together and put more efforts in deepening cooperation in humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HADR).

Similarly, more is expected of ASEAN as Southeast Asia grapples with the public health crisis and economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic that has been raging for over a year since its first outbreak in early 2020. As member states battle to contain the spread of the disease and revive their devastated economies, the push for stronger regional cooperation in health by providing medical equipment, vaccines, and therapeutics to neighbouring countries in need, as well as expediting regional agreements on travel

and health protocols to facilitate movements of people and goods have become more urgent.

In advancing regional cooperation in HADR and public health emergencies, ASEAN and its member states have had to confront the inevitability of negotiating their policy preferences for non-interference in internal affairs and respecting sovereignty. In both policy spheres, the Myanmar story has been instructive. It took a determined ASEAN Chair and an ASEAN Secretary-General to persuade Myanmar to allow international assistance to come in in the aftermath of the Nargis cyclone in 2007 to help victims of the natural disaster within the framework of a negotiated ASEAN-UN-Myanmar arrangement (Pitsuwan, 2014). Similarly, it took a trusted regional mechanism, the ASEAN Humanitarian Coordinating Centre (AHA), to send humanitarian assistance to the displaced people in the Philippines' besieged city of Marawi city during the 5-month long battle in 2017 and to the refugees in Myanmar's Rakhine state in 2019 (AHA Armor, 2020). By the same token, it took a proactive Indonesian President and its Foreign Minister to rally their counterparts in the ASEAN capitals to call for a Special ASEAN Summit in April 2021. The Summit saw ASEAN leaders persuade the head of the Myanmar's military to cease violence and hostilities against civilians and agree to a ASEAN-led humanitarian corridor and the appointment of an ASEAN Envoy to facilitate dialogue among contending parties, with the view to working toward a political settlement to the crisis (Mahmud Haziq, 2021).

In the same way, it was the shared threat to public health and the economy after the SARS outbreak in 2003 for ASEAN leaders to agree, together with its counterparts in China, Japan, and South Korea, to have an ASEAN plus Three (APT) disease surveillance and epidemiological training network to deepen cooperation in pandemic preparedness. These mechanisms have facilitated the exchange of information and expertise on emerging infectious diseases like H1n1 in 2009 and the ongoing COVID-19 virus. These mechanisms are helping improve the nature of health governance in Southeast Asia and beyond (Caballero-Anthony, 2020).

While the examples above show that the *ASEAN way* can be negotiated to allow for the grouping to act, there are also difficult issues where a regional response is absent. So far, the military coup in Thailand in 2014 and the on-going protests that led to the arrests of civilians have not generated any visible response from ASEAN, nor have the opposition crackdown in Cambodia and the reported human rights violations and atrocities committed by the Duterte administration in the Philippines against drug offenders. In these cases, the ASEAN human rights body (AICHR) has no power to hold governments accountable. Correspondingly, ASEAN has no provisions in its Charter to impose sanctions or suspend its members for violating the principles of democracy, human rights and good

governance as outlined in the ASEAN Charter (Kausikan, 2021; ASEAN Charter, 2008). This has become a conundrum as ASEAN confronts the current crisis in Myanmar. (Kausikan, 2021; Alexandra & Laksmana, 2021; ASEAN Charter, 2008).

5. Conclusion

For developing states in Southeast Asia, the task of achieving regional peace and security is an ongoing work in progress. To achieve these goals, ASEAN is not only aiming to have negative peace, meaning the absence of interstate conflict. More importantly perhaps is its goal of engendering positive peace where the structural impediments like poverty, inequality, discrimination, and social divisions, among others, are eradicated or managed. To ASEAN, peaceful change must be sustainable peace (Fry & Kemp, 2004; Carden, 2019).

This thinking is illustrated in ASEAN's notion of national resilience and comprehensive security. It is also reflected in ASEAN's 3-pillared community-building approach, which draws close linkages between peace, security, and development to be achieved in tandem and not sequentially. Arguably, such an approach presents a theory of peaceful change, reflecting a transformative framework that recognises the foundations of sustainable peace: inclusive communities, economic progress, people-centered security, and social justice (Emmers & Caballero-Anthony, 2021). This also challenges the limits of the 3-isms which have dominated the IR literature. This paper has examined how Southeast Asia has managed peaceful change by asking whether peace has indeed prevailed in the region since the end of the Cold War era. The paper argues that the Southeast Asian experience is instructive as it reflects how the narrow confines of the traditional International Relations theories and their respective approaches to security studies do not provide a compelling answer to that question. Rather than focusing solely on interstate peace, the paper has argued that the subject of study should be domestic and international sources of change and peaceful transformations.

While such an approach is more comprehensive and responsive to contemporary security threats, the goal of achieving sustainable peaceful change in Southeast Asia is fraught with challenges. The current crisis in Myanmar has all the potential of escalating into a civil war, not only because of the sustained demonstrations against the military junta, but the growing restiveness of ethnic armed groups like the Karens, Shans, Kachin and the Arakan armies that reject the rule of the Tatmadaws (NIKKEI Asia, 2021). Compounding this crisis is the intractable Rohingya crisis which remain unresolved at the national level. The lack of progress to this long-drawn internal conflict will remain a major hindrance to sustainable peace

in Southeast Asia. So too are the long-running internal conflicts in Thailand and Indonesia that need resolution, as well as the challenges of maintaining the fragile peace in the Philippines after the establishment of the autonomous Muslim region in the South. Taken together, these internal conflicts continue to be formidable agendas for sustainable peace in the region. Southeast Asia's history of peaceful change has highlighted an ability by the regional states to manage their differences and navigate major power competition. As regional states move toward fully realizing their goal of an ASEAN political and security community, peaceful transformations are no longer enough. Peace attained must be sustainable if Southeast Asia is to continue to be a zone of peace, security, and stability.

Notes

1. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) established in 1994 has 27 members comprising the ten ASEAN states, plus its 10 dialogue partners (China, Japan, South Korea, US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Russia And The European Union), North Korea, Mongolia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Timor Lester, and one observer (Papua New Guinea). The EAS, established in 2005, comprise the 10 ASEAN states and 8 dialogue partners – China, Japan, South Korea, India, US, Australia, New Zealand And Russia; while the ASEAN Plus Three, established in 1999, brings together the 10 ASEAN states with China, Japan And South Korea.
2. RCEP brings together the ten ASEAN member states, China, Japan, Korea, Australia and New Zealand into one trade agreement.
3. In ASEAN, Indonesia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam are among the most vulnerable countries in the region to the impacts of climate change.

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