Trust-Building in Southeast Asia: What Made it Possible?

By Mohamed Jawhar Hassan

While Northeast Asian nations face considerable obstacles to building trust, many rooted in historical grievances and mutual suspicion, the countries of Southeast Asia appear to have largely overcome past differences and are embarked on a trust-based project to build a closer regional community.

Mohamed Jawhar Hassan explores how the circumstances surrounding the development of ASEAN have contributed to this transformation.

WHEN SOUTHEAST ASIA emerged slowly from the clutches of colonialism in the last century it was a region riven with conflict and instability. On the domestic front, renewed nation-building was often a painful process that had to contend with insurgencies, secessionist movements, political unrest, civil strife and coups.

Relations among states were frequently bad too. Historical enmities bred by past conflict, territorial sovereignty issues and disputes over land and maritime borders undermined bilateral relations and regional peace. Border incidents, armed confrontations and disruptions in diplomatic ties were normal features of the prevailing environment. Vietnam even invaded its neighbor, Cambodia, in 1978 and occupied the country for a decade. Major power conflicts and the Cold War also divided Southeast Asia into communist and non-communist halves. Southeast Asia is very different today. The countries of the region are largely at peace with themselves and with each other. There has been a sea change in the level of trust among them. The remaining territorial disputes are muted and are being handled peacefully through diplomacy, negotiations and international arbitration.

Applying the model postulated by Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett in their book Security Communities (1988), the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations has transformed itself from a “nascent” to a firmly “ascendant” security community. Indeed, war today between neighboring ASEAN states (such as the Indonesian “confrontation” with Malaysia in 1963-1966 and Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia) is generally unthinkable, and ASEAN is evolving into a security community in the classic Deutschian sense.

Despite some lingering problems aggravated by residual territorial disputes and other occasional bilateral issues, progress towards the creation of an ASEAN Economic Community by the end of 2015 and thereafter is set to further strengthen the bonds of trust and the emergence of a credible community in Southeast Asia.

There is another, profoundly significant dimension to the achievement of these Southeast Asian states. This is their remarkable ability to attract all the major, middle and lesser powers outside Southeast Asia to join various ASEAN-centered platforms for regional co-operation and trust-building in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific region.

The ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus, ASEAN Plus Three process and the East Asia Summit all contribute to trust and confidence in the wider region, both directly and indirectly. The ability to foster regular constructive dialogue and substantive co-operation among the contending parties involved in the North Korean nuclear issue as well as the world’s largest powers such as the United States, China and Russia is no mean achievement. That this is being done by a grouping of largely developing countries that are small or at best middle powers, some of them among the poorer economies of the world, is remarkable indeed. It would be hard to find a parallel in any other part of the world.

A LEGACY OF CO-OPERATION

What has made all this possible? It would be stretching the imagination to assert that ASEAN was responsible for all of these achievements. Certainly, ASEAN itself contributed little to strengthening domestic peace and stability in member countries, except in an indirect way by creating a conducive external environment. This, after all, was not ASEAN’s purpose. Western powers, especially the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, arguably contributed as well to regional stability when they assisted the fledgling Malaysia (which then included Singapore) in resisting the confrontation of Indonesia.

Trust-building in Southeast Asia owes much to bilateral mechanisms of co-operation and conflict management. Many security problems in the region are bilateral in nature and are addressed through bilateral avenues rather than through the region-wide ASEAN mechanism. Issues such as security along the common borders of Malaysia and Thailand and Malaysia and Indonesia are, for instance, addressed by their respective General Border Committees rather than being brought to the ASEAN table. Likewise, bilateral territorial disputes are managed by the respective parties, and if there is mutual agreement, by submission to the International Court of Justice rather than to ASEAN.

This also explains why ASEAN often did not take a leading role in the management of issues that were essentially bilateral or even sub-regional in character. This has led some scholars and observers to unfairly criticize ASEAN for allegedly skirting problems and “sweeping things under the carpet.” Until ASEAN becomes, if it ever does, a supranational entity in which elements of national sovereignty are voluntarily arrogated to the regional body, as in the European Union, many sub-regional and bilateral problems will continue to be addressed at these levels.

An appreciation of this fundamental fact will help in the understanding of what can and cannot be properly expected of ASEAN. Dependence on bilateral channels also implies that there needs to be strong political will among the respective leaders, governments and peoples to earnestly address issues bilaterally. An excellent example was provided by President Suharto of Indonesia. It was his statesmanship, in contrast to President...
ASEAN is now in a quandary. The sharpening of major-power rivalry in the region would pose serious challenges to its commitment to remain neutral and non-aligned when some of its members tilt more heavily towards some of the external powers. Ties among member countries will likely become strained. Hence, some countries have resisted the push from various quarters in recent years to declare the principle of non-intervention no longer relevant and realistic in a more globalized world. While acknowledging the limits of the principle in the contemporary world, they fear that absent even the normative protection afforded by the principle, they will become easy prey to intervention by the world’s more powerful states under various guises and pretexts, as has indeed occurred in West Asia and Africa. Understandably, it is the less democratic countries that feel themselves more vulnerable. Pressure from neighboring countries and their civil societies in the region has led to some stress and distrust in relations. As Southeast Asian states evolve to become more democratic, this apprehension is likely to recede though not altogether disappear.

Fifth, ASEAN's principle of neutrality and non-alignment, along with the low level of major-power rivalry in the region since the end of the Cold War, helped ASEAN states build trust among themselves and with outside powers of all hues. ASEAN states are not altogether non-aligned. Thailand and the Philippines are alliance partners of the US, and Singapore has close military ties with the US also. Malaysia and Singapore are also parties to the Five-Power Defense Arrangement with the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. But these ASEAN states have not targeted their defense alliances at each other or at external powers. This has helped build confidence in each other. This situation differs markedly from that in Northeast Asia, for instance.

With the retreat of US military forces from Vietnam in 1973 and the end of the Cold War, Southeast Asian states were generally left to themselves to maintain military co-operation with their traditional partners without incurring the suspicion of other regional states and major powers. Even US treaty partners such as Thailand have developed close and fruitful relations with China. However, the resurgence of China and the US military’s “rebalance” or “pivot” to Asia is beginning to upset the equilibrium. China’s recent, more assertive stance in the disputed areas of the South China Sea is also causing nervousness among Southeast Asian claimants, especially the Philippines and Vietnam, causing them to develop stronger strategic and military ties with the US. Japan is also seeking to develop closer military co-operation with countries like the Philippines in response to China’s policy in the East China Sea, following the purchase of three of the
disputed islands by the Japanese government from its private Japanese owner.

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**Sixth** and last, ASEAN's comprehensive model of community-building that embraces extensive co-operation in the political/security, economic and social/cultural fields has created a sound foundation for trust-building. Habits of regular dialogue; functional co-operation across diverse areas; development assistance to Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam through the Initiative for ASEAN Integration to close the development gap among members; and mutual assistance in times of humanitarian crisis are gradually fostering a sense of community in which mutual trust can be enhanced.

In this environment for region-wide co-operation, even when governments and their peoples are temporarily at loggerheads over specific issues, such as the Thai-Cambodian dispute over ownership of the Preah Vihear temple, there is a forum to sustain engagement and friendship.

**MUCH TO BE DONE**

The six factors cited above are among the primary elements that facilitate trust-building within a multi-layered framework of comprehensive co-operation binding Southeast Asian nations and peoples together. But Southeast Asia cannot be complacent. Trust-building is still a work in progress and has to be constantly tended. Trust can easily evaporate, especially over mismanaged territorial disputes and perceived slights to national dignity. Difficult issues such as Preah Vihear on the Thai-Cambodia border, the Ambalat sea block between Indonesia and Malaysia, Lahad Datu between Malaysia and the Philippines and even stray incidents of mistreatment of domestic helpers from neighboring countries can suddenly generate strong nationalist sentiment that can trigger diplomatic fallout and minor conflict even among the closest of neighbors.

Southeast Asia is not alone in this regard. It can happen to the most advanced of regional communities such as the European Community. The current spat between the United Kingdom and Spain over Gibraltar is a case in point.

Southeast Asia’s experience in trust-building is unique to the circumstances in the region. It cannot be fully replicated elsewhere. But other regions still in search of a satisfactory degree of trust can perhaps find some important pointers.

It is difficult to plant and grow the seeds of trust in a climate of deep suspicion and hostility that is constantly kept on the boil by various parties. It is difficult when each side only sees fault in the other and denies its own — which is unfortunately easy to do. It is difficult when ideology is unnecessarily allowed to become an obstacle. It is difficult when statesmanship is scarce and bows easily to sentiment on the street. And it is difficult when we are not reconciled with our own history and our own region.

Southeast Asia, however, has demonstrated that with patience and perseverance these difficulties can be overcome.

Mohamed Jawhar Hassan is Chairman and Chief Executive of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), Malaysia. He is member of the Editorial Board of *Global Asia*. 