Southeast Asia stands out as perhaps the most diverse region in the world. It is home to a range of political systems (communism; absolute monarchy; democracy; soft authoritarianism; and, until recently, a military junta), levels of development (from least-developed countries to oil-rich Brunei and investment-rich Singapore), world religions (Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, and various other faiths), and scale (in terms of geographical size and population). Given these and other forms of diversity, it stands to reason that foreign relations in Southeast Asia would be marked by fragmentation. Though not entirely uniform, Southeast Asia, in fact, demonstrates a surprisingly cohesive regional approach to foreign relations, a harmony owed largely to common worldviews that have gestated through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

This chapter traces the evolution of foreign policy thinking and practice among the countries of Southeast Asia. It begins with a historical overview, leading to the creation of ASEAN. Throughout its evolution, ASEAN has helped put Southeast Asian countries on the same page, especially in terms of economic relations and security affairs. That said, significant tensions remain within ASEAN, as do distinctive foreign policies. Overall, ASEAN countries are increasingly united, amplifying Southeast Asian voices beyond what individual countries could achieve.

Foreign relations in historical perspective

Southeast Asia’s stunning diversity is intimately tied to historical foreign relations, as the region is situated between two of the world’s great civilizations. Southeast Asia is south of China and east of India, providing a meeting place for their peoples, economies, and worldviews. From China, Southeast Asia gained trade as well as models for statecraft through the Chinese tributary system. From India, Southeast Asia also gained trade as well as cultural influences, namely religions, such as Hinduism; Buddhism; and, later, Islam, which spread from the subcontinent to maritime Southeast Asia. While reality was not nearly so neat, as Chinese Buddhists and Indian princes also played important roles, Chinese political economy and Indian culture made lasting impressions on the peoples of Southeast Asia. That said, Southeast Asian communities were always actors in their own right, able to strategically
adapt foreign influences to local circumstances and tastes. For Anthony Reid (1988: 6), “The fact that Chinese and Indian influences came to most of the region by maritime trade, not by conquest or colonization, appeared to ensure that Southeast Asia retained its distinctiveness even while borrowing numerous elements from these larger centres”. Although early foreign relations were significant, they were always outweighed by relations among the peoples of Southeast Asia, whose intra-regional commerce tied diverse kingdoms together.

Within Southeast Asia, one finds distinctive approaches to early foreign relations. It is useful to distinguish between mainland and maritime polities. Mainland Southeast Asia was home to large Buddhist kingdoms based on wet rice agriculture. These kingdoms were involved in local wars for manpower and paid tribute to China, with some kingdoms emulating Chinese models of bureaucratic politics. Meanwhile, maritime Southeast Asia looked very different. Less populous and home to several small kingdoms, the archipelago was immersed in global trade networks. International relations in each subregion, though, can be understood in terms of a Mandala, a Buddhist visualization of power in which stronger actors attract weaker ones within their orbits (Wolters 1999). When the reach of larger powers waned, smaller kingdoms either broke away on their own or shifted to pay tribute to other powers.

Lucrative trade in maritime Southeast Asia, namely for spices grown in what is now eastern Indonesia, attracted early European influences to the region. In 1511, the Portuguese invaded Malacca, a trading hub strategically located in the Straits between Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula. Spain soon arrived from the Pacific to the Philippines, where Manila would serve as a Galleon port for the silver trade with China. Dutch and British traders would later establish control over various Malay ports, pushing out Portuguese communities. In the mid- to late 19th century, Dutch and British colonizers established more direct control, moving inland to actually produce and extract resources instead of simply controlling trade. It was at this time that the larger kingdoms of mainland Southeast Asia began experiencing colonial rule, as they had been more difficult to control and offered fewer benefits in terms of trade. However, the growing intensity of colonial competition as well as hope for a back door into China led Britain to colonize Burma and France to colonize Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Only Siam/Thailand remained independent of European control, although the kingdom was deeply influenced by colonial advisors.

European colonialism represented a break from traditional foreign relations in Southeast Asia. Colonizers worked to limit contact among the peoples of Southeast Asia, sever their relations with India and China, and construct export-based resource economies tied to Europe. Instead of being part of a regional system, colonies were cut off from their neighbours and tied to their distant colonizers, further fragmenting the already diverse region. This began to change with the rise of Japan, whose victories over Russia and ability to catch up to Western powers inspired many Southeast Asian nationalist movements. As Japan came to occupy much of Southeast Asia by 1942, this admiration turned into outrage over new abuses, with these Asian colonizers demanding free labour, food, and women. That said, Japanese expansion dislodged European control and enabled new ties among Southeast Asian independence movements.

The end of colonialism after the Second World War brought an opportunity for Southeast Asian countries to reconnect to one another and to the world, and to promote regional development. Such expectations were tempered by the instability of the independence era. Newly independent Southeast Asian countries tended to be led by charismatic nationalists, men who ruled over unstable economic and political systems. There were several early efforts to create unity among postcolonial countries. In 1955, Indonesia hosted the Bandung
Conference in which Indonesian, Burmese, and South Asian leaders staked a mutually supportive, independent position in the Cold War (Wright 1956). Burma’s U Nu, Indonesia’s Sukarno, and Cambodia’s Sihanouk would emerge as vocal spokesmen for developing nations, and the Conference would later evolve into the Non-Aligned Movement.

Postcolonial cooperation failed in light of challenges associated with independence and the Cold War. First, while leaders might have expected rapid development in the aftermath of colonialism, the reality was that each country faced significant challenges. Southeast Asian countries were forced to confront the devastation of the Japanese and independence wars and faced several domestic insurgencies, all the while realigning their economies from colonial exports to something else. Domestic instability was reinforced by, and reinforced, regional instability. National borders were constructed by colonial powers, and with independence, it was not clear how Southeast Asian leaders would treat their inherited boundaries. The 1950s saw various territorial disputes, with leaders sponsoring insurgents in neighbouring countries in an effort to destabilize them. Thailand still claimed parts of Malaysia and Laos, while the Philippines claimed Sabah in Malaysia. The greatest challenge came from the region’s largest country, Indonesia, where President Sukarno sought to deflect attention from domestic problems by attacking regional enemies. Sukarno’s ‘Crush Malaysia’ campaign framed Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei as colonial creations, lands that the President felt should become part of Indonesia. In the early 1960s, Sukarno sponsored armed forays into Malaysia and Brunei, causing regional instability. By 1965, Malaysia’s ethnic tensions led Kuala Lumpur to kick Singapore out of the country, making the latter a particularly vulnerable city-state.

Perhaps the greatest foreign relations challenge faced by Southeast Asian countries was the Cold War, in which countries were pushed and pulled into distinct camps. All Southeast Asian countries faced communist insurgencies, with state and rebel forces supported by the West, the Soviet Union, or China. At the end of the First Indochina War (1946–54), the United States created the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO). Comprised of the Philippines, Thailand, Pakistan, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and colonial Britain and France, SEATO was an effort to develop an Asian North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); however, the grouping lacked cohesion, and SEATO lacked a dedicated military command. It included only two Southeast Asian countries and clearly reflected American interests. Meanwhile, communist forces were growing in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Indonesia as the Cold War served to divide Southeast Asian countries into antagonistic camps. By the early 1960s, Southeast Asia was deeply divided, with little cooperation and considerable threat of regional war.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations

ASEAN was born in the aftermath of the fall of Sukarno in 1965 and the rise of General Suharto in Indonesia. Sukarno’s adventurism had long destabilized the region, eschewing peaceful foreign relations by vowing to destroy Indonesia’s neighbours. By 1964, the precarious balance of military and communist forces began tipping towards the latter, while the Indonesian economy continued to spiral downwards. As Suharto came to power amidst the slaughter of Indonesian leftists, he sought to reassure neighbours that the regional giant had benign interests. ASEAN was formed in 1967 by Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia. In some ways, it was a new version of the now-defunct SEATO, except that Malaysia and Singapore were now independent of Britain and Indonesia’s coup had brought it into the capitalist camp. All five original ASEAN members were anti-communist and promoted capitalist development in partnership with Western countries. That said,
ASEAN was very different from SEATO. It was a more authentic regional voice, with far less American influence and no members outside of Southeast Asia. From its inception, its goals were also more focused on the region. While ASEAN countries were allies against communism, their goals were more based on improving relations among member states than with confronting non-members.

ASEAN initially lacked much institutional strength, limited to a series of meetings among member states. The meetings had two primary goals. First, ASEAN countries promoted non-interference in other members’ internal politics. Until this point, the five countries were deeply involved in the internal affairs of other Southeast Asian countries. As discussed, Indonesia threatened Malaysia, but Malaysia also supported insurgents in Thailand and the Philippines, Thailand supported insurgents in Malaysia, and Singapore and Malaysia were still recovering from their recent separation. Within its first decade, ASEAN helped to diminish such tensions as each country pledged to respect the sovereignty of other members and not to interfere in their domestic politics. Second, ASEAN promoted economic development. While ASEAN countries did not carry out much regional trade, especially since many produced similar raw materials for export, leaders pledged economic cooperation. Non-interference also enabled leaders to focus on economic growth as political instability declined. The twin goals of political non-interference and economic growth later became known as part of ‘the ASEAN Way’, a norm that Amitav Acharya (2014: 63) characterizes as “a process of regional interactions and cooperation based on discreteness, informality, consensus building and non-confrontational bargaining styles”, a supposedly Asian style that is often contrasted to more adversarial Western approaches (see also Stubbs 2008).

Despite efforts to expand its scope, ASEAN development was blocked by the Cold War. ASEAN held its first Summit in 1976, at which leaders signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, pledging to resolve problems peacefully. In 1977, the second annual Summit brought Japan to the table in the hope of establishing lasting relations with ASEAN countries. Meanwhile, communist Vietnam began making peace overtures to ASEAN members in an effort to balance Chinese pressure. Relations soured in 1978, when Vietnam invaded Cambodia, ostensibly to put a stop to the murderous communist Khmer Rouge regime. The invasion served as a wedge between ASEAN and the region’s communist countries, especially as Thailand feared continued Vietnamese expansion, and the region was undergoing rapprochement with China. Although ASEAN expanded for the first time in 1984, welcoming newly independent Brunei, the 1980s generally saw limited development of the Association, which did not even schedule another Summit until 1987.

The end of the Cold War, marked regionally by Vietnam’s withdrawal from Cambodia, finally allowed ASEAN to expand its reach and deepen its institutions. In the early 1990s, its members began reducing tariffs and liberalizing regional trade, leading to the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) being signed in 1992. Since this time, AFTA has expanded in numerous steps, leading to a reduction in tariffs and non-tariff trade barriers. The 1990s also saw the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), a multilateral forum that brings together the Foreign Ministers of ASEAN and other regional powers. ARF currently includes the East Asian countries of Mongolia, China, South Korea, and Japan; the South Asian countries of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka; the Pacific countries of Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea; and Russia, Canada, the United States, and the European Union (EU). This expansive grouping is intended to allow dialogue on sensitive security issues, for instance, providing a venue to discuss North Korea or perhaps the South China Sea.

The 1990s were a decade of ASEAN expansion, as Southeast Asia’s remaining non-ASEAN states began working towards membership. The collapse of the Soviet Union
accelerated changes in Vietnam, which ended its occupation of Cambodia. This paved the way for Vietnam to join ASEAN in 1995, with accession soon following for Laos and Myanmar in 1997. In 1999, after years of political turmoil, Cambodia finally joined as well. Its membership made the organization coterminous with the geographic region, as all ten Southeast Asian countries were now part of ASEAN.2

Just as events in 1978–79 slowed ASEAN’s expansion, the 1997 Asian Economic Crisis slowed the momentum that had developed throughout the 1990s. The Crisis effectively crippled Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, leading to the fall of the latter’s authoritarian New Order and of President Suharto, one of ASEAN’s founding fathers. With numerous conflicts unfolding across Indonesia and economic uncertainty throughout the region, ASEAN integration halted. During this time, the ASEAN Way took on a new importance as a non-conflictual style and informal meetings allowed countries to focus on domestic affairs without much regard for regional pressures.

ASEAN’s growth got back on track in 2000. It was in this year that the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) was signed. The CMI represented a multilateral currency swap among Southeast and East Asian countries, an effort to provide a regional response to future economic crises. The 2000s saw an array of other changes for ASEAN as the region finally came to speak with one voice in world affairs. With expansion complete within Southeast Asia, ASEAN was now able to reach out to other regions, especially East Asia. ASEAN had begun meetings with China, South Korea, and Japan a few years prior. After the CMI, these countries agreed to develop ASEAN plus Three (APT) as an organization of its own. East Asian countries have long lacked a sense of cooperation or means of communication. In fact, East Asia is the only world region lacking a supranational organization of its own. With ASEAN serving as host, East Asia finally discovered an agreeable form of regional multilateralism. ASEAN also reached out further, across the Pacific, with the creation of the East Asian Summit (EAS) in 2005. Promoted by Malaysia, the EAS would include APT as well as India, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Russia. By speaking with one voice, ASEAN has allowed its members to take on an importance beyond what each country could do alone, enabling the Association to play a leading role in world affairs.

As ASEAN came to function as a single actor on a world stage, its deepening role within Southeast Asia continued, although for some, it continued to disappoint. In 2003, ASEAN deployed its first peacekeeping operation when Thai and Malaysian troops were requested by Indonesian forces to monitor a ceasefire in the restive province of Aceh. In 2007, ASEAN countries signed the ASEAN Charter, affirming the principles of non-interference and economic cooperation. Although the Charter was launched to help ASEAN move towards a deeper union, it notably lacked democratic language or suggestions for domestic reforms among member countries. It was followed in 2012 by the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, a surprising development in a region known for its reticence regarding the concept of rights. ASEAN leaders have long spoken of being ‘caring societies’ but have rejected the language of human rights, which may rub against the principle of non-interference. Scholars have explained the contradictory nature of human rights proclamations in the region as part of ASEAN’s need for legitimacy in the eyes of Western countries (Poole 2015). Other achievements by ASEAN include liberalizing the flow of skilled labour, connecting ASEAN stock exchanges, and creating the single aviation market. Another major change occurred in 2008 when Thailand’s Surin Pitsuwan became the Secretary General of ASEAN, bringing a more active, vocal style to the post. Pitsuwan even spoke in terms of human security and human rights, seeking to give teeth to the ASEAN Charter. The outcome has been mixed, with ASEAN seemingly lacking common visions, but the organization expands nonetheless.
ASEAN: a paper tiger?

Academics have long debated the significance of ASEAN, which has been seen as falling well short of its lofty ideals but also as a testament to regional unity and a model for other developing regions. It is difficult to assess its strength. Significant ink has been spilled debating its implications among neorealists, neoliberals, and constructivists. If ASEAN is compared to the EU, or even held to the high standards of its own rhetoric, what we see can be disappointing. Critics (and members) note that ASEAN is primarily about golf, durian, and karaoke, and has not done much to resolve some pressing issues. David Jones and Michael Smith (2007: 149) have challenged regional diplomats and “academic enthusiasts” who “seek to embellish” ASEAN’s achievements. Although ASEAN has made important steps in terms of regional economic integration, it remains true that its countries still do not trade much with one another. As ASEAN’s advances are primarily economic, its security functions have generated particularly strong criticisms. ARF is often seen as ‘the dog that does not bark’, failing to tackle major security issues and thus falling far short of its potential. It is true that ASEAN has more catered receptions than it has clear policy outcomes.

On the other hand, given the tremendous diversity of Southeast Asia, including the underdevelopment and political turmoil of many of its member states, compared to the developed, largely Christian, and democratic countries of the EU, ASEAN appears more impressive. Defending against critics, former ASEAN Secretary General Rodolfo Severino (2006: 190) suggests that “Media commentators often dismiss the ARF as a ‘talk shop.’ However, I see nothing wrong with ‘talk shops’; indeed, they are extremely useful in dealing with sensitive regional-security issues”. Despite its many challenges, ASEAN represents “one of the most enduring inter-governmental organizations outside Europe” (Beeson 2014: 204). It is in many ways a model of south-south relations, outstripping the African Union, Mercosur, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and other regional bodies in terms of its cohesion and autonomy from Western pressures.

In contrast to the numerous threats of interstate war among Southeast Asian countries in the 1960s and 1970s, today, the region enjoys a much deeper sense of peace. Acharya (2014: 6) suggests that through ASEAN, Southeast Asia has achieved a regional order that can increasingly be understood in terms of a security community in which member states no longer consider the option of war with one another. Despite the serious security challenges discussed below, ASEAN has led not only to the reduction of insurgent activity but also to increasing military cooperation among ASEAN countries. Leaders have long used ASEAN meetings to exchange intelligence, and by the late 1970s, began conducting joint military training exercises. Although army cooperation has been more limited, naval and air force interactions have been common, being promoted first by Indonesia and increasingly embraced by Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines. Singapore operates training facilities in Indonesia and Thailand, as well as other long-term installations in Brunei and the Philippines (Acharya 1991: 167). Following the 2002 Bali Bombings, ASEAN countries established joint antiterrorism exercises against regional threats such as Jemaah Islamiyah. For many years, Malaysia has served as a third-party monitor for conflicts between the Philippines and its Muslim minorities in Mindanao. Southeast Asian states can hardly be said to possess integrated regional armed forces, but ASEAN has nevertheless helped bring new levels of security cooperation. Not yet a security community, ASEAN has provided, at a minimum, a vehicle for collective, cooperative security among individual countries.

By coming together through ASEAN, member countries have been able to amplify their voices beyond what they could achieve alone. For the purposes of this chapter, it is important
to note that ASEAN increasingly acts as a single entity on the world stage, harmonizing the foreign affairs of its members. Economically, negotiating as a bloc has brought rewards for its members. Acharya (2014: 142) observes that ASEAN has “used collective bargaining to secure better market access for ASEAN products”, voting collectively in trade talks. Politically, ASEAN speaks as a single entity in talks with China, the EU, and other powers. One indicator of ASEAN’s corporate identity is that countries appoint ambassadors to ASEAN, demonstrating its status as more than just an organization. The United States appointed an ASEAN Ambassador in 2008, providing the Association a new level of diplomatic recognition beyond the sum of its parts. ASEAN has grand plans for further development internally and externally, and while it will likely be slow to realize these aspirations, we should expect that it will continue to play an important role on the world stage.

The centrality of ASEAN within and beyond the region is evident in terms of ongoing progress towards Free Trade Agreements. After years of slow progress, AFTA has, as of early 2016, nearly eliminated all tariffs and duties on intra-regional trade. Externally, ASEAN has negotiated various Free Trade Agreements with China, South Korea, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and India. Many such agreements were enacted before Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam were even members of the World Trade Organization, as ASEAN has pushed its members towards international trade. In these agreements, ASEAN largely negotiates as a single actor. For example, the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area, signed in 2003 with the final agreement reached in 2009, begins by listing the agreement as one between India and the individual countries of Southeast Asia, which are mostly referred to as ASEAN for the remainder of the document. This demonstrates that ASEAN is not entirely a cohesive actor as its member states still move at different speeds, but that it negotiates as an Association.

Diverse foreign relations

In many ways, to understand ASEAN is to understand foreign relations in Southeast Asia. The Association’s internal and external policies represent, to an increasing degree, the international face of Southeast Asian countries. That said, ASEAN does not represent the totality of foreign relations in Southeast Asia. In fact, considerable academic attention to ASEAN may obscure the complexity of regional affairs. While the previous sections made a case for ASEAN as the vehicle for Southeast Asian foreign relations, this section provides a reminder that the region’s foreign relations remain varied, driven by the interests of distinct states. While this may seem to affirm a neorealist perspective, with state interests sometimes trumping cooperation, pointing out areas of divergence should not be seen as dismissing ASEAN’s impressive development. Discussing ways in which the foreign policies of Southeast Asian states have not been subsumed by ASEAN can be approached in two ways: looking at divergent policies and tensions within Southeast Asia and looking at divergent foreign policies with the rest of the world.

Intra-Southeast Asian foreign relations

Despite cooperation through ASEAN, Southeast Asian countries continue to maintain intra-regional relationships outside of, and indeed opposed to, the ASEAN community. One early example was the 1980 Kuantan Principle, in which Indonesia and Malaysia expressed support for Vietnam against China against the wishes of Singapore, the Philippines, and especially Thailand. This provides a rare case of multilateralism within Southeast Asia beyond the confines of ASEAN. From this time, Malaysia and Indonesia sought to engage
Vietnam and Laos, while Thailand continued to veto ASEAN talks with the communist 
countries. There are also multilateral forums below ASEAN, such as various Mekong River 
partnerships (China, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam) and Economic Growth Triangles 
(Indonesia–Malaysia–Singapore, Indonesia–Malaysia–Thailand). Singapore, Malaysia, and 
Indonesia are often understood as a micro-region known as ASEAN Kecil (mini-ASEAN) as 
they have much closer cooperation than newer members.

There are also several examples of sustained, sometimes open tensions within Southeast 
Asia, despite the principle of non-interference enshrined in the ASEAN Way. From 1996 
and in intermittent years since, leaders (and publics) in Malaysia and Singapore have been 
critical of Indonesia for the chronic haze caused by forest fires and destructive logging in 
Sumatra and Kalimantan. As James Cotton has noted (1999: 331), “conventional ASEAN 
modalities have proved a severe disappointment…[Indonesia] has been unwilling or unable 
to put the interest of the neighbourhood ahead of its closest associates”. The 2015 Haze was 
especially bad, leading to tens of thousands of respiratory infections and cancelled events 
in Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei. Similarly, ASEAN has refused to comment, let alone 
act, on crackdowns in Myanmar and coups in Thailand, despite concerns from member 
countries and the world. In a WikiLeaks cable (2007), Singapore’s elder statesman Lee Kuan 
Yew suggested that it was a mistake to admit into ASEAN Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and 
Vietnam, whose ineptitude has slowed regional development. Lee applauded Vietnam as a 
quick learner but saw Laos as “an outpost for China” and described Myanmar’s generals as 
“stupid”. These comments demonstrate ongoing political tensions within the region, espe-
cially between more developed economies and ASEAN’s laggards.

It was noted above that ASEAN has helped Southeast Asian countries overcome festering 
regional security issues. Leaders in Singapore and Malaysia have suggested that regional con-
flicts had been overcome, or at least muted, by ASEAN (Acharya 2014: 128). While ASEAN 
has helped to reduce open military conflicts, this does not mean that Southeast Asia is peace-
ful. Singapore and Malaysia continue to clash over water resources. Indonesia and Malaysia 
maintain an ongoing rivalry, with Malaysian treatment of Indonesian workers and perceived 
appropriation of Indonesian culture sparking diplomatic rows and violent protests. Similarly, 
the mistreatment of Filipino workers in Singapore provides occasional conflicts between the 
two charter ASEAN members.

Perhaps the largest area of tensions is territorial disputes. Not all such disputes continue 
to fester—Malaysia has respected a 2008 International Court of Justice ruling in favour 
of Singapore’s claim to Pedra Branca Island—but in general, regional unity has not led to 
peaceful resolutions of territorial disputes. The Philippines is part of an ongoing dispute 
with Malaysia over Sabah. This was a focal point during the formation of Malaysia in 1962, 
returning to prominence in the early 2000s. In 2002, the International Court of Justice 
ruled in Malaysia’s favour; however, the claim continues to be proclaimed by Philippine 
nationalists (despite the refusal to recognize the historical Sulu Sultanate upon which the 
claim to Sabah is based). In 2013, a militia from Sulu landed in North Borneo and took part 
in an armed standoff with Malaysian soldiers that resulted in fifty-six dead militants, six dead 
civilians, and ten dead Malaysian soldiers. Yet another intra-ASEAN clash is the ongoing 
dispute between Thailand and Cambodia. While Thailand is also involved in perennial ten-
sions with neighbouring Myanmar, its single largest issue involves the disputed Preah Vihear 
Temple. Despite a 1962 International Court of Justice ruling in favour of Cambodia’s claim, 
post-Thaksin upheaval in Thailand has brought increased tension over the temple. After 
clashes in 2008 left three dead and nine wounded and a 2009 skirmish that left at least five 
dead, a 2011 battle resulted in several casualties as well as the displacement of some 15,000
persons. As Cambodia requested ASEAN mediation, the Association has instead worked to limit UN involvement and keep the conflict bilateral. Strangely, Singaporean leaders criticized Cambodia’s appeal to ASEAN’s Security Council for harming ASEAN’s global standing. It was only after the 2011 clashes that ASEAN, under Indonesian leadership, even agreed to discuss the crisis, against Thai protests (ICG 2011).

Despite ASEAN efforts to produce common, harmonious foreign policies within Southeast Asia, countries continue to press their national interests against fellow Association members. The countries of Southeast Asia are home to varied approaches to human rights, democracy, trade, press freedom, and ethnic identity. While greatly diminishing tensions and the threat of war, ASEAN has failed to resolve some important flashpoints, lending credence to the Association’s critics. These examples should not suggest that ASEAN’s achievements are not considerable; however, they should urge caution for those celebrating ASEAN unity.

External foreign relations outside of ASEAN

That ASEAN is able to take part in world affairs as an actor, instead of a collection of diverse sovereign states, is remarkable. However, many ASEAN members continue to maintain distinctive foreign policies beyond the region. Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines maintain ties to their former colonizers, while Myanmar and Cambodia are close to China, Malaysia and Brunei are tied to the Islamic world, and Singapore and Vietnam work with Israel on security matters. ASEAN countries are especially divided in their relations with the United States. During the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Malaysia and Indonesia criticized American action, while the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore supported their ally. Malaysia has been an especially vocal critic of the United States. From the late 1990s until his resignation in 2003, Prime Minister Mahathir fancied himself as a leader of the Muslim world, criticizing supposed Zionist plots. Rooted in divergent policy responses to the 1997 Economic Crisis, and perhaps Al Gore’s support for Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, Mahathir was an outspoken opponent of US policy in the Middle East and of Western neoliberal policies. Although Malaysia and the United States are closer than Mahathir’s rhetoric would suggest, as the two countries cooperate in joint counterterrorism measures, Malaysia remains a vocal challenger to the United States in Asia. Malaysia has worked to move ASEAN closer to China and has promoted the EAS in part to balance the American-influenced Asia-Pacific Economic Community (APEC). The United States has strong bilateral allies in Southeast Asia, namely the Philippines and Thailand, and is sometimes accused of undermining Southeast Asian unity.

ASEAN countries also differ in the extent to which they embrace the principles of free trade. In talks with the EU, ASEAN countries were unable to establish a common position, leading to a separate Singapore-EU agreement, followed by separate agreements between the EU and Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. This has been somewhat of a trend, with Singapore promoting bilateral FTAs with a great range of countries, sometimes followed by Thailand and Brunei, with poorer countries, such as Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar staying behind. As producers of raw materials and light manufacturing, most Southeast Asian countries are essentially competitors on the world market, with the exception of Singapore, whose highly globalized economy is based on financial services, shipping, refining the resources of neighbouring countries, and other services. This is shown in Singapore’s pioneering efforts to create the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), an agreement that began with Singapore and New Zealand, and evolved further with Brunei and Chile. TPP negotiations have not involved ASEAN, but instead Singapore, Brunei, and later signatories Malaysia.
Southeast Asia and Vietnam. Other ASEAN members have expressed interest in joining, but this would demand a massive reduction in protectionist policies. In many ways, the TPP eclipses AFTA, showing it up in terms of its extensiveness as well as the nascent Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a prospective regional FTA driven by ASEAN that includes China but excludes the United States. The TPP shows that the globalism of some countries has outpaced that of others, and Singapore seems unwilling to wait for its ASEAN neighbours to catch up.

**Internal and external divisions: the South China Sea**

The failure of ASEAN to develop a common position in global affairs as well as its ongoing internal divisions is exemplified by ongoing disputes over the South China Sea. The People’s Republic of China has made bold territorial claims in the South China Sea, with Chinese maps based on the ‘Nine-Dash Line’, or ‘Cow’s Tongue’, dipping into Southeast Asia. Since the 1980s, the Chinese Navy has framed the South China Sea as ‘lost territories’, part of China’s humiliation during the colonial era, despite the fact that Imperial China was hardly a maritime power. In 1992, China passed a law claiming much of the South China Sea and asserting its right to evict foreign vessels. Since this time, China has taken to constructing fortifications on small islets and to expanding their landmasses. Of particular importance have been Chinese construction and troop placements on Mischief Reef, located 250 km from the Philippines and some 1100 km from China. ASEAN has been divided in its response. Cambodia has stood as a staunch Chinese ally, along with Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos. Meanwhile, the ASEAN countries most affected by these claims, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia, have opposed Chinese territorial claims. Vietnam and the Philippines have been the most vocal claimants, with the former’s interests in the Parcel Islands and the latter’s in the Scarborough Shoal and Spratly Islands. The Philippines actively encourages a US naval presence in the region to balance China, and Vietnam apparently agrees. Meanwhile, Malaysia seems torn between its general anti-US and pro-China political stance, and its particular claims to the Spratly Islands. Malaysia has stated that the United States should not be involved in this Asian dispute, thus “echoing the Chinese position”, but also maintains its own claims against China (Buszynski 2003: 352). It should also be noted that ASEAN countries have their own internal clashes, with the Philippines often accusing Malaysia of working with China.

By 2000, China seemed to rethink its confrontational approach to ASEAN on this issue, leading to a 2002 Declaration of Conduct on the South China Sea between China and ASEAN. The Declaration signified the end of China’s insistence on bilateralism, and its increasing acceptance of ASEAN as an actor. That said, it had little lasting effect on the ongoing dispute and did not lead to any sort of permanent agreement. At worst, the Code allowed China to appear open to multilateralism while really buying time as ASEAN has failed to follow up. This is largely due to the fact that ASEAN has demonstrated little internal cohesion on this issue. For Emmers (2014: 62), Southeast Asian claimants “do not want to discuss their respective sovereignty claims… under the auspices of their regional body”. ASEAN has sought only to prevent open conflict and to maintain neutrality on the issue. In 2012, an incident between China and the Philippines was not discussed at ASEAN meetings, with acting ASEAN Chair Cambodia blocking efforts to put the dispute on the agenda. For the first time, an annual ASEAN Ministerial Meeting failed to produce a joint statement, signifying real intra-ASEAN divisions. In response, the Philippines filed a unilateral claim with the United Nations, and the Philippines and Vietnam have looked to the United States
to help balance China. Despite later Indonesian efforts to involve ASEAN, the South China Sea dispute has demonstrated a lack of unity within ASEAN and the Association’s inability to overcome major regional problems.

Conclusions: looking forward

This chapter has suggested that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations has developed common foreign policy positions among Southeast Asian countries. A region with such diverse political regimes, faiths, levels of development, size, and more should not see much cohesion, and yet it does. Southeast Asian foreign policy coordination is in large part a product of ASEAN, which continues to surprise many observers through its continued development. Southeast Asia has less tension than regions such as South Asia, the Middle East, and sub-Saharan Africa. And ASEAN has developed stronger institutional cooperation than other developing regions, Latin America, or even North America, trailing only Europe in its regional integration. ASEAN has amplified and harmonized the voices of Southeast Asian countries in world affairs. It has strengthened relations within the region as well as made Southeast Asia an important voice in world affairs. That said, we should not exaggerate ASEAN’s achievements as the countries of the region retain distinctive foreign relations in the region and beyond, and sustain some bilateral tensions. Following Don Emmerson (2007: 426), “Southeast Asia the region and ASEAN the organization are not the same thing”, and nowhere is this clearer than in the realm of foreign relations.

Looking forward, we should not expect ASEAN to collapse due to intra-regional disputes, nor should we expect a EU-type common market or parliament any time soon. Instead, we will likely see many small steps forward, with occasional steps back, as in 1979 and 1997. ASEAN is likely to see continued security cooperation, more political meetings, and deeper economic relations. Although the foreign relations of Southeast Asian countries cannot be understood solely in terms of ASEAN, as years go by, we should expect continued integration.

Notes

1 Southeast Asia refers to the following ten countries: Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, and the Philippines.
2 Fittingly, the two countries at the edges of the region, East Timor and Papua New Guinea, are also observers in ASEAN.

Bibliography

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