

# I Report dell'IsAG

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*Enmeshing the Dragon: limits of cooperation and regional institutions in Southeast Asia*

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## Sommario

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*Questo saggio considera il ruolo degli Stati del Sud-Est asiatico e delle istituzioni regionali (ASEAN, ARF e APT) nella strategia indirizzata a garantire la sicurezza regionale. È possibile che il modo di agire dell'ASEAN possa contribuire a concretizzare un'effettiva politica adatta a fronteggiare l'ascesa cinese? Tutto ciò appare impossibile, dal momento che i principi di non interferenza, non intervento e non ricorso all'utilizzo della forza per risolvere delle dispute sono basati su multilateralismo, inclusività, consulto e consenso. Al contrario, la Cina tende ad ignorare le dichiarazioni dell'ASEAN e utilizza gli accordi bilaterali in modo tale da avere il sopravvento nelle dispute relative al Mar Cinese Meridionale. La stessa strategia di un esteso coinvolgimento cinese, che dovrebbe portare Pechino all'interno di una rete di accordi multilaterali, è fallita come effettivo mezzo per garantire la sicurezza regionale. In questo modo la Cina è libera di rifiutare qualsiasi reclamo legale, così come iniziative e norme di condotta poste dall'ASEAN. Inoltre, gli Stati Uniti appaiono disinteressati a rafforzare un sistema multilaterale incapace di affrontare la sicurezza regionale, e per questa ragione Washington preferisce continuare allo stesso modo lungo la via della diplomazia bilaterale. Ciò che appare l'interesse principale della sicurezza dell'ASEAN, ossia limitare l'azione di Stati Uniti e Cina, si scontra con gli interessi nazionali e l'incapacità di costruire una politica diplomatica coerente e unificata. La Cina non permetterà ai più deboli Stati del Sud-Est asiatico di essere limitata nella sua azione da un effettivo meccanismo di sicurezza cooperativa, mentre la marina statunitense rimarrà nel prossimo futuro l'unico baluardo navale tra gli Stati dell'ASEAN e la Cina.*

## Abstract

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*This paper will consider the role of Southeast Asian nations and their primary regional institutions (ASEAN, ARF and APT) in the struggle to relevantly contribute to regional security. Could the ASEAN Way assist in formulating an effective policy to face a rising China? It appears this is impossible, since the principles of non-interference, non-intervention and non-recourse of application of force in solving disputes are based on multilateralism and inclusiveness, consultation and consensus. Conversely, China tends to ignore ASEAN declarations and utilizes bilateral agreements that allow her the upper hand in the South China Sea disputes. The strategy of 'omni-enmeshment', which should bind China into a web of multilateral agreements, also fails as an effective regional security measure. With this denial, China is free to reject any ASEAN legal claims, initiatives and norms of conduct. Moreover, the United States appears uninterested in strengthening a multilateral system unable to deal with regional security, and for this reason Washington prefers to continue with bilateral diplomacy as well. What appears to be the core interest of ASEAN security, i.e. to keep the United States in and China down, clashes with national interests and the inability to build a coherent and unified diplomatic policy. China will not allow weaker Southeast Asian states to be restrained by any effective mechanism of cooperative security, whilst the United States Navy will remain, in the near future, the only nautical bulwark between the ASEAN states and China.*

**Parole chiave:** ASEAN, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Plus Three, coinvolgimento (omni-enmeshment), sicurezza cooperativa, diplomazia preventiva, regionalismo, ASEAN Way, Sud-Est asiatico

**Keywords:** ASEAN, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Plus Three, omni-enmeshment, cooperative security, preventive diplomacy, regionalism, ASEAN Way, Southeast Asia

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## 1. Introduction

This paper aims to demonstrate that regional institutions in Southeast Asia are not effective enough to promote regional security. It would be acceptable to welcome the constructivist assumption according to whom there is a strong link between the international institutions and the incorporation of the norms at a local level (Johnston in Ikenberry & Mastanduno, 2003: 109) and to take for granted that socialization, as well as the sharing of a common cultural heritage identity, can give a significant contribution to the formation of a security community, which could face effectively the challenges of confronting the claims of big powers in the region. But events demonstrate that things are proceeding in another direction, and even if some academics (Acharya & Goh) claim some success in the politics of multilateral approach to the stronger states and in the ‘omni-enmeshment’ of the big powers, I shall present evidence that a multilateral approach, even though it registered some success, is doomed to give the last word to both declining (United States) and emerging powers (China).

I will provide a brief outline of the historical context in which international regional organizations were formed, looking to the establishment in Southeast Asia of ASEAN (1967) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF - 1994). I will take into consideration the disputes in the South China Sea, in particular Chinese claims to the Spratly Islands. Moreover, I will look at the way in which regional institutions faced the challenge to defend representative state interests, with a particular consideration of the strategy of omni-enmeshment of Evelyn Goh, underlining the limits of such strategy, but also the advantages, with consideration to the position of dominant hegemony (U.S.) and that one of rising power (China) in this contest. And finally, I will present my own conclusion from the various elements elucidated herein.

## 2. Defining regionalism and Southeast Asian framework

As Katzenstein says:

Although often described in geographical terms, regions are political creations and not fixed by geography. Even regions that seem most natural and inalterable are products of political construction and subject to reconstruction attempts (Hemmer & Katzenstein, 2002: 575).

The variety of form of governments in East Asia and Southeast Asia, together with the different interests and values, seems to fit in this statement: even if considered as a common geographical entity, East, and specifically Southeast Asia, is constituted by a mosaic of different cultures that cannot easily be seen as a whole portrait.

I will consider the role fulfilled by the countries of Southeast Asia in the struggle to find a common identity, during the first attempt of setting-up a security system promoted by the United States, (SEATO)<sup>1</sup> and the second one, by building-up a proper institutional framework (ASEAN).

More than moved by a common heritage that they did not share, the Southeast Asian countries were previously attempted to be put

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<sup>1</sup> Precisely, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization only included two members among the Southeast Asian countries: the Philippines and Thailand. As stated by the Office of the Historian: «The purpose of the organization was to prevent communism from gaining ground in the region. Although called the “Southeast Asia Treaty Organization,” only two Southeast Asian countries became members. The Philippines joined in part because of its close ties with the United States and in part out of concern over the nascent communist insurgency threatening its own government. Thailand, similarly, joined after learning of a newly established “Thai Autonomous Region” in Yunnan Province in South China, expressing concern about the potential for Chinese communist subversion on its own soil. The rest of the region was far less concerned about the threat of communism to internal stability» (Office of the Historian, Milestones: 1953-1960). Therefore, SEATO was more an institution born from a necessity of regional security during the Cold War, rather than an attempt to create a regional institutional framework.

together by the United States with the establishment of an alliance, the main purpose of which was containing the Soviet threat (see Narine, 2002: 9-22), and after, with the experiment of a security community, they attempted to overcome the *realpolitik* associated national interests, with the elaboration of a doctrine that could transcend national approaches to security issues, binding all the nations into a wider forum in which it would have been possible to develop a common policy throughout the region. If by 'regionalism' we mean a policy led by a group of states tied by bonds of a common cultural identity, with the same strategic interests and objectives in terms of security, ASEAN is something worthy of study, even if it is wrong to assume that national interests have been transcended.

### 3. An historical background: is constructivist approach enough?

Regionalism was born in Asia as a nationalistic vision of the de-colonization process, in which ethnic, cultural, and political similarities amongst Southeast Asian states were stressed (Acharya, 2000: 43-47) in order to provide a background for constitutive and regulative norms to be implemented (Thomas, 2009: 7). Thus leaders are provided with the rhetoric needed to support their policies of building a regional security community. But historical circumstances, different types of economies and differing leadership opinions made it difficult to establish a security community as defined by Acharya. This is as follows:

[...] groups of states which have developed a long-term habit of peaceful interaction and ruled out the use of force in settling disputes with other members of the group (Acharya, 2001: 1).

When in 1967, at the Conference of Bangkok, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines gave birth to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, they

did so in order to protect their countries from Communist insurgencies by implementing joint policies of social and economic development, trying to reduce the influence of external threats in the region and to limit the competition between member states (Narine, 2002: 23). The birth of ASEAN came after the policy of *Konfrontasi* between Malaysia and Indonesia, after the demise of Sukarno, as unilateral act of accommodation of Soeharto towards Malaysia, and with the acceptance of Kuala Lumpur of the prominence of Jakarta in the new-born organization (see Kupchan, 2012: 217-236).

The Association had to face challenges such as the Corregidor Affair (1968), the Vietnam War (until 1975), and the Kampuchean invasion of Vietnam (1978). National considerations prevailed over the vision of a unified security policy, if we consider that the Cambodian crisis saw Indonesia applying a policy of 'cocktail diplomacy' (Haacke, 2003: 101-111), thereby furthering negotiations between the parties even if it was something counter to the six principles of the ASEAN Way (especially non-interference). It appears that the 'ASEAN Way' was one of the obstacles to the formation of a real security community. This kind of doctrine is grounded on six core principles:

[...] sovereign equality, non-recourse to the use of force and the peaceful settlement of conflict, non-interference and non-intervention, non-involvement of ASEAN to address unresolved bilateral conflicts between members, quiet diplomacy, and mutual respect and tolerance (*ibid.*: 7).

These principles were disregarded during the Kampuchean Crisis; the same happened during the East Timor crisis, not only by acquiescence with which all the states members accepted the incorporation of the former Portuguese colony into Indonesia, but also for the inability of ASEAN to effectively respond to the violence that followed the Dili independence referendum in 1999. Only with the intervention of the international

community (INTERFET) was the issue resolved. But if principles of non-interference, non-intervention and non-recourse to the use of force in solving disputes are the measure of any nascent regional security system, how can member states promote forms of regional security cooperation? What follows is a personal analysis of the specific threat, i.e. Chinese claims in the South China Sea and the way ASEAN states are confronting this challenge, with particular regard for the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Plus Three (APT).

#### 4. The ASEAN Way, an inappropriate answer?

Security has been challenged numerous times: from the crisis between China and Taiwan (1997) to the North Korea missiles (2012), and with Chinese claims to the Spratly Islands and Mischief Reef. ASEAN declarations are considered irrelevant by Beijing, which continues to prefer bilateral agreements, where her contractual power is stronger, to multilateral diplomacy. The latter is the lens under which it is possible to examine the ASEAN Way. This is the preferred Southeast Asian states approach. Acharya points out that more than a security model, such as the CSCE (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe), which could have been embedded into an institutional framework such as the European one, the 'ASEAN Way' model has been the most suitable, while the ASEAN states did not want to be confined by legal mechanisms and procedures. They understood that they could not ignore the need of multilateral consultations on regional security (Acharya in Acharya & Stubbs, 1995: 182-188).

The ASEAN security system, which aims to avoid conflicts without applying force against external powers such as China, is based on the principles of multilateralism and inclusiveness. After overcoming the simple concept of ZOPFAN (Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality), ASEAN countries concentrated their efforts both on the concept 'consultation

and consensus', as well as on the avoidance of the establishment of institutions requiring too high a degree of commitment (*ibid.*: 188).

#### 5. South China Sea Dispute, facing the limits of a cooperative security community

The South China Sea is one of the most important theatres in which ASEAN could test its ability to restrain big powers and attempt to shape regional policy. In 1992 ASEAN passed a statement, the ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea (ASEAN, 1992), in response to the occupation of certain areas of the Spratly Islands, and regretted that China, even though committed to peaceful diplomacy, was not respectful of the given word. (Haacke: 123). The crisis continued, pushing ASEAN to another statement regarding peace and stability in the South China Sea (ASEAN, 1995): Following this, other incidents relating to Chinese claims to Vietnamese shores and Paracel Islands and vicinity happened. The strategy of ASEAN has been that one of enmeshing China into a web of multilateral agreements, where international norms of conduct concerning navigation and ocean boundaries could have been more effective. In 1996 there was the first call for a regional Code of Conduct: the states involved, including Vietnam, put forth more conditions that made uniform codification very difficult (Haacke: 127). Even if ASEAN recognized the importance of Chinese maritime claims, it was not making progresses in multilateral talks, and this might have influenced Beijing to seek satisfaction in bilateral talks, where greater influence could be wielded. The only goal that ASEAN seems to have achieved up until then, had been one of de-legitimization: the use of force to solve territorial disputes, but without the ability to force Chinese commitments (*ibid.*: 137). It could be even argued that China has been able to contain the capacity of ASEAN to shape regional policy, since the 'rhythm' that Beijing is imposing is dictated also by the economic requirements following the financial crisis of 1997.

In this difficult situation, a role could be

played by the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which has been identified to be at the core of a new East Asian security policy (Hughes in Haacke & Morada, 2011: 54). Since it includes 27 participants (and, among them, United States, Japan, Russia, India, China, and European Union) it appears the only international forum that could bring about negotiations, but it has been repetitively defined as a mere ‘talking shop’ for its inability to solve the most important disputes in the region. Indeed, this Forum has been successful in promoting important concepts such as confidence-building measures and preventive diplomacy aimed to engage China in regional security dialogues. The Chinese ‘Five Principle of Peaceful Coexistence’ (Garver, 1993: 122) can be engaged by the ARF on multiple levels: not only thanks to the convergence in norms and values with China, but also with various factors such as the possibility for bilateral and multilateral dialogues and consultations made to build mutual confidence in this network of nations (Hughes in Haacke and Morada, 2010: 57).

#### 6. ‘Omni-enmeshment’ and engagement of big powers in the ARF network: *ubi major, minor cessat?*

What is unconvincing about ARF effectiveness in dealing with great powers is the ability of ASEAN states to utilize its influence to engage other powers in multilateral talks, using the convergence of norms between them and external powers for their own benefit. It is China that has the upper hand when dealing in security issues.<sup>4</sup>

The ASEAN Way, instead of providing increased bargaining leverage with China, binds its members to the respect of principles of non-interference and sovereignty that provide openings to Beijing, so China can achieve strategic objectives without serious approbation beyond statements and declarations to exercise ‘self-restraint’. Beijing’s strategy requires imposition of her military might to force a *de facto* favourable result to her policy, even if this requires the threat of

force (Mak in Haacke and Morada, 2010: 195-196).

ASEAN countries could utilize ARF as a tool to balance China’s regional influence with Japan or United States, threatening improved unilateral agreements or military defensive treaties that could threaten Chinese regional hegemonic power. Moreover, ASEAN declarations and non-binding resolutions are exactly what Beijing is looking for, conceding the respect of the principle of confidence building, identified as the first step for security cooperation by the ASEAN Concept Paper for the ARF (1995). Furthermore, Beijing’s rejection of preventive diplomacy for asserted vagueness could also include military action (Haacke, 2003: 120). Thus there is the regional perception that China is taking advantage of ASEAN’s geopolitical weakness *vis-à-vis* the South China Sea. It has been argued by Evelyn Goh that there is a way with which ASEAN states could bind great powers in regional disputes, and act more effectively as a local security community that could put in practice strategies of cooperative security. Where does this cooperative security fail in engaging with the great powers? In formulating a regional security policy, the ASEAN states elaborated a strategy of ‘omni-enmeshment’ which consists of as follows:

[...] engaging with an actor or entity so as to draw it into deep involvement into a system or community, enveloping it in a web of sustained exchanges and relationships, with the eventual aim of integration. In the process, the actor’s interests are redefined, and its identity possibly altered, so as to take into greater account the integrity and order of the system (Goh, 2005).

This strategy has been applied by ASEAN to challenge Beijing’s South China Sea policies, by attracting as many powers as possible, bringing politically and economically closer to Southeast Asian countries, and creating a bond of interdependence with the added attraction of a firm regional security balance (*ibid.*).

This effort resulted in the ASEAN Regional Forum, by which member states such as Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia tried to engage Japan, European Union, China, but also with ASEAN + 3, in which Japan, China and South Korea are called to ensure regional stability. Each Southeast Asian state has a different perception of the threat and of the concept of balance/bandwagon. Some countries (Philippines) have a long tradition of alliance with United States and are heavily involved with China and the mutual exploitation of maritime resources. On the other hand, other countries are attempting to embed particular powers in the enmeshment process; for its part, Vietnam signed a one hundred million dollar credit line agreement with New Delhi, thus granting India rights to exploit the waters about the Spratly Islands (Floracruz, 2014). Here the limitations of ‘omni-enmeshment’ are clearly demonstrated: all nations decide according to geopolitical interests, as opposed to engagement with larger issues. There is no common security policy, and ARF and ASEAN Plus Three meetings do not create legally binding determinations. This allows China a free hand to eschew commitments on legal grounds relating to the South China Sea. For its part, the United States is free to a commitment to binding bilateral policy agreements. It has been pointed out by other scholars that it a strategy of ‘honest brokerage’ is another possibility, which could engage great powers without annoying China (Yong in Shekhar, 2012: 254). This strategy, however, could not proceed beyond attempts to bind Beijing with commitments derived from international meetings with the ASEAN group.

## **7. Why China and United States refuse a multilateral approach**

The policy of security cooperation, which in practice relies on the ability of ASEAN to apply a policy of common interests, faces not only the obstacle of the national interests, but also the inability of the single states to build an effective response to regional dynamics, such

as the decline of hegemonic power (United States) as well as to the rise of China. The policy of Chinese accommodation on certain issues combines with the principle of non-negotiation of territorial disputes and sovereignty. Shekhar believes that the challenge to China lies in the gap between Beijing’s actions and ASEAN’s responses (Shekhar: 260). In my opinion, it should be examined not only from Chinese military perspectives and the different security interests of the various ASEAN states, but also within the confines of national geopolitical interests that, according to requirements, tend to align their foreign policies with what is considered to be the most accommodating power. And so, without a common identity or interests, nations such as Cambodia and Laos are aligned with China, whilst Singapore and Thailand tend to balance with the United States.

The United States, on the other hand, does not appear interested in joining a multilateral system that is unable to deal alone with security issues, and from the Cold War until the present time Washington appears to prefer bilateral military agreements. Not only because they are more effective in binding nations through treaties which are difficult to draft in multilateral forum, but also because ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum are not considered, either by the United States or by China, the key element of regional security architecture. As Haacke observed, China adheres to a *guoji geju* (international pattern) that is based on interaction amongst the major powers, identified as the United States, Europe, Japan, Russia, and the People’s Republic of China (Haacke, 2003: 130). ASEAN and its framework of institutions are considered only as a potential geopolitical force; not an established entity.

## **8. Conclusion**

This paper elaborates broad perspectives with regard to Southeast Asian security cooperation by examination of its peculiar

institutional framework. Originating in Southeast Asia but, with regard to the particular history and geopolitical interests of member nations, it is attempting to enmesh external actors great powers. The ARF presents a multilateral diplomacy forum that appears ineffective in dealing with the major challenges such as maintaining US regional interests, and preventing Chinese claims in the South China Sea. The ASEAN member states are still pursuing their own interests, thereby weakening any mechanisms of cooperative security that could be used to solve multilateral disputes. United States intervention is still necessary in order to provide navigation security during times of international crisis. Conversely, the economic geopolitical projection of China will not allow weaker Southeast Asian institutions/states to restrain her expanding power. Southeast Asian regional institutions, in my opinion, are unfit for promoting regional security cooperation, and the road ahead to promote an effective mechanism is still a long one.

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