

# The Faltering Asean Way

Friday 31 October 2008, by [VATIKIOTIS Michael](#) (Date first published: 29 October 2008).

It is ironic that just as the much-heralded Asean Charter received its final approval through ratification by Indonesia, two Asean member states faced off across a disputed patch of land and started shooting at each other. It was an inauspicious start to what the Charter's preamble refers to as 'a region of lasting peace, security and stability...'

The Thai-Cambodian border is not the only fault line that threatens peace in South-east Asia. In recent weeks, Malaysia has rattled Indonesian nerves with the threatened exploitation of disputed waters off the island of Borneo. The reaction in Jakarta? Instead of requesting the good offices of the Asean Secretary-General to mediate as envisaged in the Charter, security agencies hurriedly planned a military exercise to practice confrontation with the Malaysian navy.

Southeast Asian nations have lived in relative peace and harmony for the past half-century. But they have been reluctant up till now to formalize the mechanism by which peace is maintained. Asean member states have displayed an allergy to formal security cooperation. They have preferred instead to use informal channels and personal connections to resolve disputes.

This was a fine arrangement when Southeast Asia was a more clubbable place, its leaders more or less on the same political plane, sharing the same demons (communist insurgency and uppity peasantry). But today, Southeast Asia has become a patchwork of rather different political landscapes.

In Indonesia, a vibrant democracy has injected nationalist stridency to the country's diplomacy. In Thailand, bitter domestic political conflict is doing the same as one side seeks to undermine the other by questioning its nationalist credentials. In the Philippines, the legislature holds the threat of impeachment over the President's head and makes it hard for the country's chief executive to follow a consistent foreign policy agenda.

Pluralism, therefore, is making it hard for Asean officials to knit together the much-vaunted regional consensus. Now more than ever, Asean needs to build a framework for dispute resolution that will allow the collective security of the region to trump domestic politics and nationalist breast-beating. The Asean Charter lays a good foundation for doing so.

But despite the Charter's ratification, there are few signs this is happening. The other day when Thai and Cambodian troops started trading fire, Asean officials were at a loss to know how to intervene. Asean Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan asked regional leaders like Indonesia's President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to appeal for restraint, which he did. Foreign ministers from Indonesia and Malaysia fell over themselves to offer mediation, but no invitation came from either of the parties. The current Asean chairman, Thailand, is a party to the dispute.

Eventually, calm was restored when it emerged that the Thai and Cambodian leaders would meet on the fringes of an Asia-Europe meeting in Beijing, which they did. That is hardly an endorsement of Asean's ability to resolve disputes.

At the heart of the problem is the reluctance of Asean member states to yield an inch of sovereignty

in the interests of collective security. The past few months have seen a number of attempts to gently push the boundaries of acceptable intervention, but it has not been easy.

Witness how easily domestic politics derailed a Malaysian-brokered deal between Manila and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in Mindanao. Often, when regional mediation does get under way, jealous or competitive neighbors seek to sabotage or hamper these efforts. Not only has Bangkok been reluctant to embrace Jakarta's good offices as a mediator in the southern Thailand conflict, but also Malaysia appears to be unhappy to see Jakarta involved in a dispute along its border with Thailand.

Ever since the high-profile resolution of the long-running conflict in Aceh on the back of the devastating December 2004 tsunami, many in the region saw the so-called 'Aceh model' as a path to peacemaking easily replicated elsewhere, which is not necessarily the case.

Without a more formal mechanism to channel and regulate conflict management, with the implicit role of third-party intervention, Asean's efforts to forge a region of peace and security will fall on stony ground. There is something of a built-in contradiction between bedrock principles in the Asean Charter: on the one hand, it stresses respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; and on the other, a 'shared commitment and collective responsibility' for peace and security. Put another way: How can Asean ensure the peaceful resolution of disputes when the Charter insists on non-interference in the internal affairs of member states?

This contradiction needs resolving. When neighbours cannot settle quarrels between themselves, outsiders should be called on to do so. The irony of not allowing more space for regional mediation is that it leaves the door open for larger powers—like China in the case of the current Thai-Cambodian dispute—to act as the mediator.

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