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Sophie Boisseau Du Rocher

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## GOING BEYOND ASEAN'S INTEGRATION NARRATIVE

Sophie Boisseau du Rocher

ASEAN as a regional institution is intriguing. At its inception, no seasoned observer was placing genuine interest in the Association, predicting it would inevitably collapse with so many obstacles on its way from the domestic to the international context : the wide variety of ethnic groups, each with different norms, values, languages and religious beliefs<sup>1</sup> plus the diversity of political regimes in each of the member-States, the level of poverty and the rigidity of the alliance systems in a cold war divided environment, all of these factors could have easily derailed the region-building process. Furthermore, each of the member countries have different visions of its completion and achievement.

Nevertheless, and against all odds, the Association surprised many. Over the years, its resilience, the confidence in its distinctive mechanisms and decision-making procedures and the willingness to accommodate with each other despite serious tensions demonstrated its ability to adjust to changing conditions at the geopolitical level as well as embracing economic globalisation. Moreover, the Association has been able to cultivate a sense of a common future.

ASEAN certainly had a positive impact in Southeast Asia as it enabled a mutual learning-process to be undertaken in a confident and non-binding atmosphere. The Association gave time and ease to countries that had plenty of reasons to fight with each other. Thanks to its flexible, inter-personal and consensual mechanisms, ASEAN overcame different crises: these include the 1975 crisis when communist victories in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia posed substantial challenge to their neighbours; the 1997 economic and financial crisis when ASEAN mechanisms were strongly criticized for their impotence. Today ASEAN is confronted by competing territorial claims and Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea as well as suffering collaterally from current Sino-American tensions. In turbulent times, ASEAN has always demonstrated its ability to adapt when many expected it to fail or for it even to implode.

In this context, ASEAN's rhetoric and practice concerning integration needs to be explored in order to assess the particular nature of ASEAN integration. Even if the Association and its member-States have become more vocal in the use of the term integration, this does not mean that this ideational aspiration has been translated into a substantive achievement. We need to ask the question as to where and how ASEAN positions itself in the context of competing regional integration projects in Southeast Asia. If it cannot articulate a particular Southeast Asian identity, to what extent does ASEAN, in practice, contribute to a regional identity formulation? Addressing these questions is crucial in analysing the current challenges and evaluating the future options for the Association in the context of multiple forces affecting integration in Southeast Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> British historian, C.A. Fisher, described Southeast Asia as the "Balkans of Asia," adding that it was even more diverse than the Balkans of Europe. For an overview of the ongoing dynamics of inclusion / exclusion in Southeast Asia, see the results of a previous project, SEATIDE (<http://seatide.eu/?content=home>).

## What is ASEAN's integration narrative?

Working Paper 1 “State of the Art and Theoretical Framework” demonstrated how and to what extent ASEAN regional building was specific and could not in any way, be compared with European construction because of different backgrounds, history and objectives. For years, this point has been debated and documented in books, theses and academic articles and all converge on the conclusion that any comparison would be misleading, and probably flawed<sup>2</sup>.

Yet, the incongruity of such a comparison hasn't stopped ASEAN from using the European vocabulary of region-building. Indeed, the ASEAN's integration narrative, the repeated use of similar terms such as “integration” or “community”, has produced - and still perpetuates – confusion. On numerous occasions indeed, and notably during ASEAN summits and meetings, the term “integration” is still evoked as a kind of mantra. In public and official declarations, politicians, public servants and civil society actors in the member states of ASEAN continue to propagate what Western observers consider as a misunderstanding of integration and in doing so, to perpetrate even more confusion. The mere mention of this terminology encouraged the academic community to engage in a study of Southeast Asia's regional-building process by reference to theories and standards developed from similar processes observed elsewhere, and mostly inspired by the integrative European experience.

From the very beginning therefore, analysis of ASEAN was biased by this original misunderstanding. Undoubtedly, under the banner of ASEAN, the countries of Southeast Asia are engaged in a regional rapprochement for the pursuit of an indivisible security (comprised altogether of economic, political and strategic security); furthermore, these countries are also pursuing new pathways towards convergence and inclusion. Yet to qualify these processes as “integration” was premature and may still well be. The creation and instrumentalization of this conceptual *faux-ami* still penalizes the study of ASEAN.

### *Original ambivalence*

The original ambivalence is due to an overlap of two seemingly contradictory trends.

- 1) First, the clear expression of the need to preserve, even enhance the sovereignty of individual member-states' sovereignty after their newly acquired independence. Indeed, in ASEAN's early years, the buzz words were territorial integration, security and national development while “sovereignty was taboo,” testified the assistant of N. Ramos (Philippines Secretary of Foreign Affairs at the time of ASEAN's establishment), Delia D. Albert<sup>3</sup>. The prevalence of respect for sovereignty as an overriding goal was further confirmed by the lack of any substantial legal agreements between and amongst its members. This dearth of agreements led to an insistence on declaratory statements that could only be produced after consultations and consensus. As it has been emphasised in Working Paper 1 “State of the Art and Theoretical Framework”, no institutional capacity that is autonomous from the member states capacity has been given to ASEAN. ASEAN has been, and remains, an intergovernmental organization devoid of independent supranational capabilities.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Ewing-Chow and Tan Hsien-Li *The Role of the Rule of Law in ASEAN Integration*, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, EUI Working Paper RSCAS 2013/16, 2013, p. 3

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Delia D. Albert, Manila, 15 November 2019

- 2) Second, given the normative background of the European experience, the apparent benefits to be drawn by complying with the expectations of the international community were expected to be high; in order to be taken seriously as a regional endeavour, ASEAN's founders believed they had to refer to the original experience of the EU<sup>4</sup>. This internalized pressure helps explain the conformist use of an integrative discourse even if, as D. Albert admitted, "we were afraid because we perceived integration as giving up something strong for our sovereignty". On the one hand, it provided ASEAN with an appearance of normality on the international stage and on the other, it expressed an aspiration towards greater unity in a more or less distant future for the different constituent parts of the Association. But the way ASEAN member States conducted this rhetorical exercise was more inspirational than purposeful: the discourse merely suggested an orientation and was never considered as binding.

What was perceived as an existential contradiction by Western academics<sup>5</sup> was not considered as antinomic by political actors in ASEAN who use the terms "integration" or "community" without any reticence. For example, Thanat Khoman, the Thai foreign minister at the time of the signing of the Bangkok declaration, claimed that ASEAN's founders believed "cooperation and ultimately integration serve the interests of all, something that individual efforts can never achieve". The former Foreign Affairs Minister of Singapore, S. Rajaratnam, another signatory of the ASEAN Declaration, shared the same perception arguing that "moving ASEAN towards economic or political integration was the best way of avoiding breaking up the Association into rival and unstable States"<sup>6</sup>. Suharto's Indonesia was perceived as the "natural leader to foster regional integration"<sup>7</sup> even if in practice, this vision was rather tempered by ambiguity and ambivalence.

The source of inspiration is clearly set by the EU even if the nature of integration is different<sup>8</sup>. Once again, in the mindset of the founding fathers, integration was understood as a way to work on and smoothen differences, to strengthen a common set of values and the harmony of disconnected parts (or member-States) before enhancing a potential (and still to be defined) regional identity. As an aspiration for greater regional cohesiveness, it is a mutual learning and accommodating process with no constraints on commitment and obligations; precisely the spirit that emanates from the TAC (Treaty of Amity and Cooperation) and the Treaty of ASEAN

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<sup>4</sup> Interview of the author with Thanat Khoman, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Thailand, in Bangkok, July 1994 (Thanat himself was a law student at La Sorbonne, Paris, in the late 1950s and studied with interest the European project)

<sup>5</sup> Michael Leifer for instance, questions the contradiction between a potential ASEAN security front and the maintenance of deep divergences and perceptions amongst member states, Michael Leifer, *The ASEAN Regional Forum (Adelphi Paper, No. 302)*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996

<sup>5</sup> Thanat Koman, "ASEAN conception and evolution," in Chandran Jeshurun Ananda Rajah, K. S. Sandhu, Sharon Siddique, Joseph L. H. Tan, and Pushpa Thambipillai, *The ASEAN Reader*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1992, p. xviii.

<sup>6</sup> *The Straits Times*, 14 January 1989, Singapore, p. 24

<sup>7</sup> Dewi Fortuna Anwar *Indonesia in ASEAN: Foreign Policy and Regionalism*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1994 and Ralph Emmers "Indonesia's Role in ASEAN: A Case of Incomplete and Sectorial Leadership", *The Pacific Review* 27, no. 4 (2014), p. 543

<sup>8</sup> Cf Surin Pitsuwan « On EU and ASEAN integration models », Friends of Europe, 30 May 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrecC9nIsZU>

Concord, the two first explicitly political treaties signed in February 1976 after the communist shift in the Indochina theatre (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia). Strong personal ties and interactive networks were essential to giving substance to this vague vision without institutional foundations or obligations on technicalities. As such, integration never implied any relinquishment of sovereignty and the AFTA (ASEAN Free Trade Area), set up in 1992, is a testimony of this ambivalence. This contributes to explaining the free use of the term “integration” by member countries and the concomitant and recurrent misunderstanding of perplexed Western scholars.

### *The 1997 - 2007 shift*

Over time, with a clear shift after the 1997 crisis, “ASEAN integration” was naturally imposed as the new buzzword, as if merely evoking it could put the Association back on track. The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis revealed both the inability of ASEAN’s collective mechanisms to stop the contagion effect, but also put a new light on integration as a potential means and a vector to regain legitimacy, a return to stability and economic recovery; indeed, with the consequent turbulences, the 1997 crisis helped ASEAN to experience that being a group might be a strength and not a threat. ASEAN was shown to be irrelevant and of being powerless to address the contagion effects of a crisis it itself had partially created.<sup>9</sup> The failure to effectively manage the turbulences induced by the crisis played a crucial role in nourishing and fostering a critical re-examination, not on the nature of integration itself, but on the most efficient way to relaunch a process that could be beneficial to all and every member state. It was also crucial to underline this performative goal to the four new ASEAN members (Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia) and obtain their commitment to an aspiration towards integration, an integration that would remain hypothetical.<sup>10</sup> From this perspective of “shared interests”, the project to enhance economic “integration” made perfect sense if member-states remained committed. ASEAN provides a functional answer to strengthening their place in the regional community, one that serves their national interests without commitment to stated political objectives that could harm the same national interests.

In the midst and aftermath of the crisis, ASEAN embarked on a flurry of additional projects such as the ASEAN Vision 2020 which “envisions the entire Southeast Asia to be, by 2020, an ASEAN community” (1997), the ASEAN Investment Area (AIA) (1998), the Initiative on ASEAN Integration (IAI)<sup>11</sup> (1998), early completion of the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) (1998) and the Hanoi Plan of Action (1998-2004). Once the member countries had recovered from the Asian Financial Crisis other measures followed: the Bali Concord II (2003), the Vientiane Action Program (2004-2010), the launch of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (2007). These culminated in the ASEAN Charter (2007) - an ambitious statement

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<sup>9</sup> Sophie Boisseau du Rocher “L’ASEAN: quel ordre régional après la crise ?” in Ph. Richer, éd. *Crises en Asie du Sud-Est*, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1999, p. 23 - 42 and John Fuston “ASEAN: out of its depth?”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 20 n° 1, April 1998, pp. 22 – 37.

<sup>10</sup> *Idem*, p : 35 & Carlyle A. Thayer “ASEAN-Vietnam Relations“ un published paper presented at the *First Conference on Vietnamese Studies*, (24–26 October 2006), Hanoi, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> The IAI is the perfect example of this ambivalence: it uses the term “integration” but with the meaning previously described of “greater cohesiveness”. The Initiative for ASEAN Integration adopted at the November 2000 Summit, was conceived of as a special programme for narrowing the developmental gap with the new ASEAN member States, the CMLV group, and the founding members.

that uses on four occasions the term “integration”<sup>12</sup> for the first time in an ASEAN official document<sup>13</sup>. After ratification of the Charter, other initiatives included the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (2009), the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (2012) and, ultimately, the inauguration of the ASEAN Community (2015) whose motto is “One Vision, One Identity, One Community”. Indeed, at the end of 2015, ASEAN embarked on building an ostensibly strengthened Community based on three pillars, namely the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), with as their stated aim “to reinforce the work in progress of ASEAN integration”. It was assumed that the ultimate integration goal of the AEC project - the most elaborated of the three pillars – was the convergence of the 10 ASEAN member countries towards a single market. This would involve an intraregional production base operating according to the same principles of competitiveness and the rules of market capitalism in order to generate a freer flow of goods, services, money, investments, and labour. Indeed, economic integration was more about optimizing ASEAN’s position within the global economy. With the dependence of the ASEAN economies on external partners, this implied both tapping into the global economy but also accelerating and widening regional economic integration. Such a regional project was considered as the best option to protecting the individual member states’ future prosperity.

Economic “integration”, however, would need to precede other forms of integration. Former ASEAN Secretary-General, Rodolfo Severino, suggested that like Europe, a regional consciousness in ASEAN “must first aim at the integration of the regional economy”<sup>14</sup> and “that is precisely the path on which five Southeast Asian Nations set out 50 years ago when they established ASEAN”<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, from 2008 onwards, countless declarations stressed the importance of ASEAN’s integration and the need to empower a strong and coherent Community with a rules-based approach. As Delia Albert explained “because it was time to make something bigger than ourselves”.

#### *ASEAN and integrative connectivity*

The roadmap to ASEAN regional integration was completed in 2010 when a Master Plan for ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) was launched with three main elements: physical connectivity, institutional connectivity and people-to-people connectivity. The official document set ambitious objectives: « the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity will promote economic growth, narrow development gaps, ASEAN integration and Community building process,

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<sup>12</sup> See the official text of the Charter <https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/21069.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> The example of the ASEAN Charter speaks for itself. ASEAN has made a declaration that it aims at integration in the style of the EU, while forging an ASEAN identity. At the same time it is simultaneously constricting further possible integration thanks to three of its main clauses: (1) all decisions require unanimous support, (2) all ASEAN states must respect each other’s sovereignty and not meddle in each other’s internal affairs, (3) the ASEAN Summit (comprising the heads of state or government of the member states) is “the supreme policy-making body of ASEAN”, leaving virtually no power (no compliance mechanisms and little funding) to the ASEAN Secretariat. In other words, in practice it would be highly improbable for the ASEAN states to integrate in the way they ostensibly plan to because of their governments’ realist views and over-protection of their own sovereignty and interests.

<sup>14</sup>Rodolfo Severino *Southeast Asia in search of an ASEAN Community*, ISEAS, Singapore, 2008, p. 104

<sup>15</sup> “A vision for regional economic integration” in *A Journey towards regional economic integration: 1967 – 2017*, Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2017, p. 2

enhance the competitiveness of ASEAN, promote deeper social and cultural understanding as well as greater people mobility and connect its Member States within the region and with the rest of the world»<sup>16</sup>. Connectivity became a fashionable trope for measuring regional integration as well as providing another opportunity to keep the misunderstanding going on. « Greater connectivity “, a concept bolstered by numerous studies from the Asian Development Bank, OECD or Eria reports, national economic think tanks or the ASEAN Integration Report itself...) is presented as the n° 1 condition to pursuing integration, ie greater regional coherence and deeper linkages to gain more resilience in a highly competitive global environment. In the official ASEAN document, the term “integration” is used 59 and the term “community” 77 times!

Cross-border (transport facilitation projects by land, sea and air) and institutional infrastructure projects (harmonisation of customs procedures with an ASEAN Single Window (ASW) for standards and conformance procedures) have been launched. Nevertheless, this decision does not mean in practice implementation and once again, the member-states’ projects suffer from not being implemented. The logic behind integrative connectivity was not to strengthen ASEAN *per se*, but to be perceived by investors as a single market of 625 million people with a total GDP of over US \$ 2.3 trillion. The objective is to benefit from the profits of trade and investment reform. And indeed, China, and to a lesser extent Japan, have taken advantage of the new scheme to such an extent that, as it will be demonstrated later, it could endanger the regional process itself.

Alas, the 2010 Plan did not produce the watershed moment it promised! Facing concern after the slow progress and shortfalls following the introduction of the 2010 Plan, the ASEAN leaders decided to adopt a new Master Plan on ASEAN connectivity 2025 (September 2016) to reframe the agenda by boosting the development of infrastructure, logistics, innovation and the mobility of skilled labour. Furthermore, it introduced governance reforms within ASEAN. But, as a study concludes, the Plan on ASEAN connectivity is exacerbating internal and external challenges instead of creating new opportunities for the region<sup>17</sup>. While the basic intergovernmental processes remained unchanged, the integration’s dilemma is not solved.

### **Why an ASEAN narrative?**

Considering the difficulty of fostering ASEAN’s integration, the most trivial question is why did the Association need to maintain its commitment to integration by legitimizing this objective with numerous “conformity statements” while being aware at all times of the low level of involvement and the complacency of its member-States? Why is ASEAN sticking to its “grand vision” without addressing questions on its effectiveness and usefulness? What is the purpose of suggesting ways to achieve further integration that member States have no intention of living up to? Would it not be more productive for the Association to exit this trap and set its own course? Why are ASEAN’s integration myths maintained?

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<sup>16</sup> The Ha Noi Declaration on the adoption of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity, 28 October 2010

<sup>17</sup> Lukas Maximilian Müller *Governing Regional Connectivity in Southeast Asia – The Role of the ASEAN Secretariat and ASEAN’s External Partners*, Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Freiburg (Germany) Occasional Paper Series, n° 42, December 2018, p. 2 & p. 6

The triviality of the question should not hinder us from acknowledging the complexity of the response. Obviously, the maintenance, and even sophistication, of the narrative has a utility. A starting point for reflection might be found in the expectations - even impatience - of the international community, especially the academic community. Analysing ASEAN has become an academic challenge and an area of expertise in which specialists need to position themselves. Another part of the answer might be provided in the performative dimension of ritual discourse.

### *The quest for theorizing ASEAN*

As mentioned above, ASEAN puzzles the observer: it is a kind of “non-identified political object” as it doesn’t fit into any theoretical box in the study of regionalism be it federalism, functionalism or constructivism (...): as Acharya and Stubbs have cogently argued, « ASEAN couldn’t be theoretically informed »<sup>18</sup>. Because of its ambivalence (what Davies defines as its “enigmatic nature”<sup>19</sup>), its dual function, and because of a degree of its own conformity to align with the standards of other regional institutions, the Association has been heavily criticized by scholars who underscore its inability and incapacity to deal with regional situations and events<sup>20</sup>. Yet, to be fair, these criticisms need to be taken cautiously as they might reflect simply a low-level understanding of the organisation<sup>21</sup>. This implicit warning hasn’t prevented scholars from engaging in a jargon tug-of-war to stamp « *the* » new concept that could best describe the Association’s distinctiveness. But none has succeeded in solving the ASEAN integration conundrum that refers to the contradictions of an Association founded to protect the Nation-States but called upon to frame regional integration.

After our first working paper stressed the integration trap and questioned the ASEAN dilemma<sup>22</sup> - how can the Association pretend to integration without effective mechanisms or rules? -, the present empirical research paper will provide a nuanced assessment to make sense of ASEAN by trying to explain the gap between what is perceived by some Western academic researchers as a failure<sup>23</sup> as “a miracle” by prominent Southeast Asians<sup>24</sup>.

This debate over ASEAN integration’s theoretical explanations has been somehow chimerical considering its shortcomings. Indeed, the burning issue is whether this question has any sense at all as it is more concerned with rhetoric than practice. The answer is certainly unsatisfactory in explaining the ASEAN conundrum and often ends up with stressing the preferences of member-states namely concerns about sovereignty, domestic regime security and economic

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Stubbs & Amitav Acharya « Theorizing Southeast Asian relations: an introduction » in *Theorizing Southeast Asian relations: emerging debates*, Routledge, 2016, p : 1

<sup>19</sup> Mathew Davies *Ritual and Region: the invention of ASEAN*, Cambridge Elements, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Shaun Narine « ASEAN in the 21st century: a sceptical review », *Cambridge Review of international Affairs*, vol. 22, issue 3, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> John Fuston « Challenges facing ASEAN in a more complex Age », *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (August 1999), pp. 205-12.

<sup>22</sup> *A quest for Community: the ASEAN Dilemma*, SEAPA Fellowship 2019 – 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Lee Jones “Explaining the failure of the ASEAN Economic Community: the primacy of domestic political Economy”, *The Pacific Review*, 29 (5), March 2015, p. 1 – 24 & John Ravenhill « East Asian regionalism: Much ado about nothing? » *Review of International Studies*, 2009, 35(S1), 215–35

<sup>24</sup> Kishore Mahbubani & Jeffery Sng *The ASEAN miracle: catalyst for peace*, National University of Singapore Press, 2017.

interdependence, notably that involving foreign partners<sup>25</sup>. The transformation of the Association has been driven - and seems to be still mainly inspired - by the defence of states and their political leaders' interests. Regime survival is first amongst these (as the return to authoritarian rule in some ASEAN countries demonstrates) as well as national socio-economic concerns and relations within a global environment. From this perspective, ASEAN is a variable of adjustment at the service of its member States and remains the sum of its parts rather than an independent entity with its own autonomous existence. More than relying on institutional compliance mechanisms it is the strength of interpersonal relations between political actors from the member states that is considered as a means of enforcing agreements. Logically, it cannot work as a catalyst for regional integration, such a move being immediately perceived as a threat to its sovereignty regime. As a result, regional community building is only a secondary objective. Doubts about ASEAN's coherence and relevance are well-founded, and observers can see many examples open for questions, from the South China Sea dispute to the promotion of an ASEAN perspective on Human rights or the divisive impact of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.

Nevertheless, these simplified explanations are not completely satisfactory as they may fail to explore ASEAN's true nature. While an in-depth study of ASEAN requires a theoretical prism, either realist or constructivist, it should accommodate new and different perspectives to enrich our understanding. If, according to the classic definition given by Hedley Bull, "institutions are sets of habits and practices shaped towards the realisation of common goals"<sup>26</sup>, then ASEAN is an institution of its own right, and the distant, non-binding goal of integration is necessary, at least - and it is a kind of paradox - for the cohesion of the member-States themselves. Because it is repetitive, the integration narrative instigates and instils bonds, actions and goals. ASEAN was not born out of idealism but of necessity and pragmatism as the most adjusted response to the survival of regimes.

For the same persistent pragmatic reason, ASEAN and the member-States need to maintain the momentum, or at least the illusion of momentum towards integration. Token regional integration activity is sufficient to reassure the groups that push for it while not endangering the core national interests of its members.

As previously mentioned, in order to maintain its distance from external actors and ensure its continued relevance, ASEAN developed its own interpretation of integration. Integration - a term which has never been defined precisely in ASEAN circles or official documents - is understood as a directional move that brings together dispersed parts into a more cohesive entity. From an ASEAN perspective, it is not designed to produce substance but to enhance the conditions for security for each of the members of the community. Integration means cooperation, not a dilution of sovereignty and this contributes to explaining why economic integration - through the market - was perceived as easier. ASEAN integration proceeds from a different premise than the EU. For the Association, it is to consolidate and strengthen sovereignty rather than constraining or limiting it. Domestic interests are the driving factors that shape and influence regional preferences and the Association does not have the institutional

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<sup>25</sup> Min-hyung Kim "Theorizing ASEAN Integration", *Asian Perspective*, 35, 2011, pp. 407 – 435.

<sup>26</sup> Hedley Bull *The anarchical society*, Columbia University Press, 1977, p. 74.

capability to develop any autonomous capacity of its own. Moreover, the principle of non-intervention remains the overriding regional norm, trumping other normative ideas of the rule of law, respect for human rights etc. Yet, concomitantly as a consequence, its lack of clear rules of engagement on the international stage distorts the perception of ASEAN by external partners. Hence it adopted intergovernmentalism with a soft legal regime as framework and mechanisms of governance<sup>27</sup>. Simultaneously, and as a consequence, its lack of clear rules of engagement endangers ASEAN's perception by external partners. As veteran Singapore diplomat Tommy Koh puts it, "ASEAN suffers from a serious perception problem... Policy-makers in Washington and Brussels do not take it seriously and continue to disrespect the institution".<sup>28</sup>

### *The performative dimension of ASEAN rituals*

The performative dimension of ASEAN discourses and statements on integration should not be undervalued. It contributes to explaining their sophistication and resilience despite producing no clear results. Language is not only purposive but also hortatory. It functions as a form of social action and in so doing, transforms meanings and perceptions: the mere utterance of the terms "integration" or "community" acts as a kind of beacon of regionalism and incites movement in a centripetal direction. Invoking the term "ASEAN integration" as a kind of magical catchphrase functions as a mantra to inculcate a feeling of cohesion<sup>29</sup>. ASEAN resorts to foundational semantics that are endlessly repeated in the course of speeches by politicians and civil servants, and in the declarations and documents to consolidate and project the Association.

The ASEAN integration narrative matters because it has a performance utility. One should not assume that this performative function is a by-product of the reality, but it just assumes it might one day be the reality: it heralds the coming, the construction, of a reality, albeit an idealized one. This institutional discourse frames an expected, yet potential, future which codifies an "ideal regionalism", one that is desirable, costless and achievable with minimal implementation efforts. Furthermore, in setting a far-distant goal, the narrative disguises current divergences and thus giving the appearance of regional unity.

Once again, the multiple and diverse constituent parts of the complex region that is Southeast Asia make the rapprochement between them highly sensitive and problematical. At the various national levels, there is no consensus on a linear process of region-building. Therefore, the process should be flexible and dynamic enough to allow certain adjustments, and, according to a former Secretary general of ASEAN, to look for a balance "between what is desirable and what is possible, between the ideal and the practical, between ambition and reality, between desired ends and available means"<sup>30</sup>: in practice, this means ASEAN turns a blind eye on non-

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<sup>27</sup> Imelda Deinla *The Development of the Rule of Law in ASEAN: the state and regional integration*, Cambridge University Press, 2017

<sup>28</sup> "Tommy Koh "ASEAN at 40: perception and reality" in D. Nair and P.O Lee eds *Regional Outlook Southeast Asia, 2008 – 2009*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2008, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> David M. San Juan, "Premises, Perils and Promises of ASEAN integration", *Journal of Developing Societies*, 34 (3), 2018, p. 326.

<sup>30</sup> Rodolfo Severino, *Sovereignty, intervention and the ASEAN way*, Address to the ASEAN Scholars' Roundtable, Singapore Institute of International Affairs, 3 July. [asean.org/static\\_post=sovereignty-intervention-and-the-asean-way-3-july-2000](http://asean.org/static_post=sovereignty-intervention-and-the-asean-way-3-july-2000).

compliance without much trying to enforce compliance. The terms used should be vague and compatible with several meanings, scopes and practices.

At this point, the performative dimension of words converges with an ASEAN specific diplomatic culture, that is « a certain stock of ideas and values » and a set of norms<sup>31</sup>. We suggest that the way ASEAN member-States deal with pressures, constraints and challenges frame a specific intramural and internalized approach to the process of identity formation.

This diplomatic culture finds an expression, as Matthew Davies has convincingly demonstrated, in rituals and symbols. These hold in check the centrifugal tendencies of power politics by presenting the idea of an « imagined » region that aligns practitioners with a vision that frames the future as both predictable and reassuring<sup>32</sup>. The ASEAN integration narrative has a ritual value and it acts as a reminder and a vector of the founding fathers' intention; it is a construct as is ASEAN. As such the jargon is part of the regional system.

Rituals and symbols are a way of maintaining the salience and continued value attached to the regional project. As Davies argues, they serve as a representation of a region at peace with its citizens, other member-states, and the wider international community. But as there is no shared meaning and no common beliefs supporting the narrative, by essence, it cannot be binding. From this perspective, ASEAN is one additional theatre, one institutional space where different forces are playing to achieve their goals without much consideration for the institution itself. Ian Hurd even goes as far as to say that ASEAN only operates in the realm of symbolic politics rather than established obligations and policies<sup>33</sup>.

Nevertheless, the integration narrative is not a smokescreen to which member States will pay only lip service. As our case studies demonstrate, ASEAN elites take the Association seriously despite what some Western scholars perceive as its failings. Our next step will be to identify ASEAN's margin of manoeuvre.

### **ASEAN's integration narrative and case studies**

CRISEA Work Package 5 explores ASEAN's integration conundrum through a number of case studies. Its goals are to investigate forces coming from within or outside the region that drive regional integration such as connectivities (mobility of people, of knowledge, ideologies, infrastructure, goods, capital...) or, conversely, to observe trends that may contribute to a disintegration of the ASEAN Community. Our purpose is to deliver new knowledge of the structural challenges leading to systemic transformation of its system and to provide a revisited conceptual framework on ASEAN integration. In a nutshell, it is to provide a fine analysis (micro/macro) of the competing regional integrations that confront Southeast Asia and its regional institutional framework, ASEAN.

For this purpose, we have adopted a plural perspective on regional integration to demonstrate both how and to what extent, ASEAN is internally and externally contested and also how the

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<sup>31</sup> Jurgen Haacke p2 see also Kevin H.R. Villanueva & Rosario G. Manalo « ASEAN Consensus: The Intangible Heritage of Southeast Asian Diplomacy » in *ASEAN at 50*, Eria, 2017, [http://www.eria.org/ASEAN\\_at\\_50\\_4A.6\\_Villanueva\\_final.pdf](http://www.eria.org/ASEAN_at_50_4A.6_Villanueva_final.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> Mathew Davies *Ritual and Region, the invention of ASEAN*, Cambridge elements, 2018, p. 62.

<sup>33</sup> Ian Hurd, *International Organizations: Politics, Law, Practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

perception and reality of ASEAN's development as a regional entity is called into question on the ground in many quarters. The current crisis of legitimacy for globalization and its ramifications in Southeast Asia further underline the difficulties faced by the ASEAN integration model in a rapidly evolving global environment.

**Module 1:** ASEAN's place / role / function on SEA regional integration: is ASEAN really central as an integrative actor?

“Do allied member-States, regional organizations and / or external partners tend to foster integration or disintegration in ASEAN?” This is a crucial research question. ASEAN is not immune from internal divergences and external manipulations. How does the Association project and reinforce its centrality in this constructed ASEAN narrative and projected regionalization? Can it even protect its own cohesiveness?

Module 1 assesses the perception and the role of ASEAN in the integration process itself.

Sophie Boisseau du Rocher and Shafiah Muhibat compare *China and Japan's strategies in the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta*. The challenges posed by the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis alerted ASEAN that the group cannot manage its regional affairs alone without support from, and enhanced interactions with, its external regional counterparts. The rise of China provided another incentive to interact with it and involve the PRC in a larger regional framework. The establishment of ASEAN + mechanism has produced a short-lived enthusiasm that was quickly tempered by the strong pressure exercised on ASEAN by these two economic giants and by their rivalry for influence – or even sometimes control – of the Association's mechanisms. What are their strategies and ambitions for the Association? How do these strategies compete or converge in comforting regional integration? A close study of each partner's attitude and cooperation with the ASEAN institution and bureaucrats shows a great divergence in terms of approach and vision, notwithstanding the human and financial resources made available. And whatever the origin, these sometimes-conflicting visions have an impact on ASEAN's framework, principles, mechanisms and tools. They placed ASEAN in a state of added confusion and permanent compromises with the potential to devitalize its own conceptualization of regionalisation. More fundamentally, these competing views and interests on integration might lead to a counter-productive disintegration. We suggest that ASEAN's transformation could never be separated from politics in a broad regional context. The ASEAN Secretariat, including its officials and bureaucrats, is the target of a tense competition for power to which the promotion of certain concepts such as ASEAN centrality or ASEAN unity are a putative answer.

In a paper on *De/Recentralizing 'ASEAN Centrality'? Australia, Indonesia and the Indo-Pacific Regional Construct*, David Camroux explores the comparison between the approaches of an external partner (Australia) and a member of ASEAN (Indonesia) over the question of promoting their conceptions of the Indo-Pacific<sup>34</sup>. He teases out factors that impact on ASEAN cohesiveness and ostensible centrality. While ASEAN was able to maintain its centrality (by

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<sup>34</sup> Research on Indonesia has benefited from the generous input of a fellow CRISEA researcher, Shafiah Muhibat, “ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific Vision” unpublished paper prepared for the conference The New International Relations Template and Japan's Indo-Pacific Vision, Hiroshima, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2019

default) with the invention of the East Asia Summit as an ASEAN +6 event, this was not the case for APEC. APEC, a trade-economy related grouping only has some ASEAN countries as members as is the case for the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) an FTA in which only four ASEAN countries are members.<sup>35</sup>

The Indo-Pacific concept has been promoted by external powers, notably those in the Quad of democratic countries (Australia, India, Japan, US), and as attempting to contain China.<sup>36</sup> For both reasons it is perceived as potential cause for division within ASEAN. Field work interviews revealed some unease about the concept affecting ASEAN and, above all, a degree of scepticism about a concept contributing to the whole of ASEAN's integration narrative. With this doubt widespread in Hanoi, Singapore and Bangkok, Indonesian diplomats had the task of convincing their partners of its usefulness by insisting on ASEAN centrality. Field work in Sydney and Canberra showed how the question of relations with ASEAN is second to questions or relations with the South Pacific and the US. These are inscribed in larger debates over how Australia should react to Sino-American rivalry. Australia is torn between its largest trading partner (China) and its major security ally, the US. At one level giving at least token support for the Indonesian diplomatic *démarche* on an ASEAN centric Indo-Pacific is a fairly costless way of helping resolve some of these tensions. Moreover, for Australia, an Indo-Pacific acceptable to all ASEAN contributes to resolving a domestic geopolitical / existential conundrum, finding a 'home' in a region (like the Asia-Pacific) where the country's "non-Asianness" makes it a permanent outsider.

Since completing his field research, at the ASEAN Summit in Bangkok in June 2019, an "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" was adopted.<sup>37</sup> This would seem to reflect the capacity of ASEAN to reach a consensus on a perspective, but not necessarily on objectives and a strategy to achieve them. Nevertheless, by pre-empting the control of external powers over the concept and declaring its opposition to new institutions being created, the Indonesians succeeded not only in "leading discretely from behind" but bringing cohesion around the ASEAN centrality trope. The possibility that Indonesia would then become central, in an ASEAN, itself central in an Indo-Pacific, would seem to explain the Joko Widodo administration's renewed commitment to the Association. In the later stages of the administration of his predecessor, President Susilo Bambang Yodhoyono<sup>38</sup>, and at the time of the election of President Widodo himself, questions were being raised as to whether Indonesia, a rising power and consecrated as the only Southeast Asian member of the G20, had become too "big" for ASEAN.

Camroux's interim conclusions on ASEAN centrality are reinforced by his desk research drawing on the recent secondary literature, not only on Australian and Indonesian foreign

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<sup>35</sup> Of these only half - Singapore and Vietnam - have ratified the CPTPP agreement.

<sup>36</sup> French President, Emmanuel Macron, has also been a strong proponent of the Indo Pacific trope as a way of providing further legitimacy to France's overseas territories in the Indian Ocean and in the South Pacific

<sup>37</sup> ASEAN Secretariat, "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific", Bangkok 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2019 (accessed at: [https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific\\_FINAL\\_22062019.pdf](https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf))

<sup>38</sup> Evi Fitriani, "Yudhoyono's foreign policy: is Indonesia a rising power?" in Edward Aspinall, Marcus Mietzner & Dirk Tomsa (eds), *The Yudhoyono Presidency: Indonesia's Decade of Stability and Stagnation*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015, pp. 73-90

policy, but on ASEAN itself. In particular an extended essay by Mathew Davies (2018) draws attention to the performance of regionalism undertaken by ASEAN. Davies argues that through the creation of a shared ritual and symbolic framework the Association reinforces individual members' state sovereignty. Rather than analysing the political documents and policies ASEAN produces, our concern should be with the ritual of ASEAN meetings. Within the evolution of the secular liturgy of these meetings, the concept of ASEAN 'centrality' was invoked for the first time only in 2006 once its membership englobed all of the states conventionally seen as part of Southeast Asia. Yet when 'centrality' is invoked it is done so as an *acquis* as if it had existed since the very foundation of the Association in 1967. Robert Yates (2019) recently published monograph elucidates the social function of ASEAN in a larger regional order. To extend the metaphor the conductor "does not call the tune" and being central does not necessarily imply being the main or principle actor, but the convenor or chair.<sup>39</sup> Extending the work of Alice Ba<sup>40</sup>, Yates' important contribution is to draw attention to the need to distinguish between the Association's external role and its internal one. Its external role is one nested within a mutually beneficial, albeit tentative bargain with the great powers. This role of external conductor is, however, in tension with that of the primary manager of the intra-regional Southeast Asian Order. From the perspective of this paper, and as the vast bulk of literature on ASEAN concurs, the main purpose of this internal order is the protection of the individual state sovereignties of the member states. This is possible because ASEAN is an ostensibly neutral (depoliticised?) regional organization which, in practice, provides legitimacy to regimes ranging from dysfunctional democracies, such as the Philippines, to authoritarian monarchies, such as Brunei.

Malgorzata Pietrasak is conducting research on *Russia-ASEAN relations* and, more specifically, the role of Russia in the process of regional integration in Southeast Asia. She is examining the question to what extent does Russia effectively and visibly enhance the unity of ASEAN. What is the Russian strategy under President Vladimir Putin towards ASEAN? Her research activity has involved interviews with Russian researchers as well as with Southeast Asian partners, notably in Vietnam, considered by Moscow as a proxy State. The objectives of the research are three-fold. Firstly, to evaluate the Russian presence in ASEAN with the hypothesis that Moscow is seeking to strike a balance between the most prominent regional powers, namely the USA and China, as well as pursuing its own international aspirations. Secondly, address the question of the influence of Moscow in fostering regional integration or conversely in weakening ASEAN. Thirdly, linked to this point, how does Russia reinforce ASEAN's new regionalism? Indeed, the basic question put forward by Pietrasak is to understand what kind of vision Moscow has for ASEAN and its strategy to promote this vision.

Due to limitations, particularly of an economic nature, Russia cannot counterbalance the impact of the key superpowers. It seems appropriate to depict its role as a way of Russia contributing

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<sup>39</sup> Suzuki Sanae "Chairship System and Decision Making by Consensus in International Agreements: The Case of ASEAN" unpublished paper presented at the *4th EuroSEAS Convention*, Berlin, 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> October 2019

<sup>40</sup> Alice Ba "The Association of Southeast Asian Nations: Between internal and external legitimacy" in Dominik Zaum (ed.) *Legitimizing International Organizations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 132-161 and Alice BA "Multilateralism and East Asian Transitions. The English School, Diplomacy, and a Networking Regional Order", *International Politics 2019* (accessed at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41311-019-00202-x>)

to ASEAN's conventional "hedging" strategy.<sup>41</sup> Reinforcing its position in the region requires a remarkable level of diligence and particularly fine diplomacy on the part of Russia since it operates on an exceptionally difficult ground and does not want to be perceived as a follower of China. On the contrary, Moscow tries to be perceived as an independent player, which is a way of strengthening its position towards a powerful neighbour.

Provisional conclusions are as follows:

1. Russia is an integral part of the geopolitical game in Southeast Asia.
2. Despite the fact that Russia has strengthened and further developed its strategic relations with China, each of the two pursues its own interests regarding ASEAN.
3. In a situation where relations with the EU have become destabilised, it is consistent with Russia's interest to seek greater influence in Southeast Asia and secure a more active presence.
4. In practice the notion of ASEAN centrality is supported by Russia and it is not questioned in any of its dimensions – economic, political, security-related and even in the social sense.
5. However, Russia's capabilities with regard to exerting an impact on ASEAN institutions are limited in terms of economic cooperation. In contrast, greater capabilities have enabled a stronger visibility in terms of political cooperation and in building a new security architecture.
6. Nevertheless, Russia has not yet worked out satisfactory mechanisms to successfully cooperate with ASEAN, although many bilateral commissions have been established. It cannot effectively pursue its interests on the multilateral forum or diversify the tools of cooperation. Russia finds it more convenient to operate within the framework of bilateral relations with ASEAN member states, although it treats both forms of cooperation (bilateral and multilateral) on a par. It lacks consistency in its operations, focusing on spectacular declarations, which emerge during summits and, yet, later are not followed up with adequate funding or implementing structural instruments (like in the case of "Greater Eurasia" project).
7. Overall, Russia's relations with the regions of East Asia and Southeast Asia should be viewed through the prism of the increasingly active role of Siberia and the Russian Far East in Russia's Asian policy.

Nguyen An Ha and Nguyen Dinh Ngan are conducting their research work on the relations between China and ASEAN in the new context of international relations in the region with a specific focus on the influence of China on the integration in Southeast Asia. They do so through examining the case of Vietnam from 2015 to present.

**Module 2** is focusing on regional architectures: how do they contribute to the integration or disintegration of ASEAN?

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<sup>41</sup> On the debate on hedging and balancing see Evelyn Goh, *The Struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy & Transition in Post-Cold War East Asia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

As mentioned above, ASEAN has implemented policies in an attempt to adjust the pressure of the forces of globalization in a transitional polycentric context, where the Association is an entity, but only one among several competing actors and sometimes not the one chosen by the member-states themselves. Are they competing or mutually assisting one another in this spaghetti bowl of regional bodies? Will ASEAN be able to tame the forces of globalization at the local, national and regional levels, particularly in a time of Chinese predominance?

Marissa Paderon has conducted research on how the implementation of *Free Trade Areas (FTAs)*, *Challenging ASEAN Centrality*. Her paper reviews the free trade areas (FTAs) vis-à-vis ASEAN's internal integration commitments and evaluates the risk for ASEAN to be marginalized by other FTAs (specifically the TPP and RCEP) in the region. She uses an extended gravity model to analyze the determinants of bilateral trade flows of ASEAN member countries with other free trade areas in the region such as the ASEAN+3, ASEAN+6 and the TPP economies. Empirical results indicate that gross domestic product is a strong determinant of ASEAN's bilateral trade flows with ASEAN Member States, followed by exports to TPP economies, ASEAN+6, and ASEAN+3 countries. This supports the economic integration idea that there is more trade when a larger number of countries are involved. To provide insights for leveraging trade possibilities with other regional trading arrangements, ASEAN member countries' export potentials within the TransPacific Partnership FTA are empirically tested and compared with those in ASEAN+3, and ASEAN+6. The empirical findings reveal that ASEAN trade with TPP, ASEAN+6, ASEAN+3 and ASEAN-member countries generally exhibit export potentials for ASEAN.

The empirical findings indicate that while ASEAN is engaging in trade with TPP-member countries may prove to be productive, trade with ASEAN+3, ASEAN+6 and ASEAN-member countries should not be discounted. In this way, ASEAN can maintain its central economic role in regional trade. This implies that ASEAN should deepen both its internal and external arrangements for economic integration, yet this cannot be considered as an option but is a prerequisite. ASEAN should continue to deepen its economic integration among its member-states, while pursuing its external economic relations with its bilateral and multilateral partners – ASEAN+1 FTA partners. These include the RCEP as well as TPP economies in particular, the US, Mexico, Chile and Canada. Her work however contends that there is difficulty retaining ASEAN centrality given the fact that its individual members trade intensively with other economies. Moreover, given the 'non-interference' principle, each member state is free to engage in trade agreements with other nations.

Françoise Nicolas and Elsa Lafaye de Micheaux are conducting research on *Chinese investment in ASEAN*. An oft-heard assumption is that inward foreign direct investment (FDI) flows into ASEAN will necessarily enhance regional integration, but this is far from obvious.

The key research question they ask is whether FDI inflows may act as an integrative force within ASEAN. In contrast to what is often argued, one of ASEAN's goals as a group is not so much to enhance the development of intra-regional investment but rather to attract more FDI into the region (in particular under the ASEAN Investment Area framework). In the case of

ASEAN, the role of FDI has always been extremely important in the development process. The objective of the research is to take the example of ASEAN to examine the impact of FDI (be it external or intra-regional) on economic integration within the group with a special focus on China. It is asked if and how Chinese industrial investment in ASEAN is strengthening further ASEAN *de facto* integration, as they partly knit together and connect Southeast Asian economies. But, in doing so does it follow the rules of the ASEAN game or does it deflect from it?

Based on initial fieldwork, preliminary findings suggest that while Japanese direct investment may lead to greater regional economic integration (intra-ASEAN integration) they tend to reflect a vertical integration approach and to favour the development of regional production networks. However, Chinese direct investment is different in nature. Although it may also enhance connectivity (through the development of infrastructure), in practice, it is not terribly conducive to much intra-regional trade. For China, the ASEAN intra-regional economic space is less a concern than the addition of national markets in Southeast Asia. Moreover, if the share of intra-ASEAN trade is more or less stable (around 26 % of member-states total trade), intra-ASEAN investment is increasing fast.

What are the characteristics of Chinese behaviour in dealing with ASEAN and its member-states? Field work in Malaysia is clearly demonstrating a new pattern in terms of content and this result needs to be assessed for the ASEAN countries more generally.

From China's current perspective of less than 10 years, investments are very often strategic and also political in their *modus operandi*. The Southeast Asian space, as a sum of national economies, natural resources and political powers, is becoming more relevant to study. This is to the detriment of concern with the ASEAN perimeter and its role as a regional entity.

**Research Group n° 3** is working on border and transborder interactions and how they are challenging ASEAN's basic principles.

In recent decades the trajectory of globalization and recent geopolitical developments have impacted the characteristics of trans-border interactions and, therefore, their implications in international relations. How is the perception/reality of ASEAN challenged by new connectivities, new forces and grassroots transformations engendering different levels of engagement, support and challenges? Do these transnational connectivities lead to enhanced cooperation or do they exacerbate rivalries? And what kind of impact do they have on regional integration/disintegration processes seen from an ASEAN perspective. The research questions asked by Research Group 3 seek to catch and capture the diversity of approaches and strategies undertaken by external actors in negotiating with / ignoring/ or instrumentalizing ASEAN to comfort their own foreign/regional policy objectives.

Dominik Mierzejewski has conducted research on the cooperation framework, the *modus operandi*, of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), consisting of five ASEAN member states (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam) and China. He also examines some

special economic zones in the region to address the questions mentioned above and to measure the responses.

The relations between China and ASEAN can be described as multi-layered, multilevel and multidimensional. First, these relations function at the multilateral level. Second, PRC relations between member states – bilateral relations and those inscribed within the triangle of US-ASEAN- China ‘minilateralism’. Third, local government to local government relations, cultural, people to people exchange especially in the context of relationships with the Chinese diasporic community in region. In other words, there is a great complexity of relations not only with China, but also with other actors.

Based on interviews in China, and a comprehensive literature overview, this research project analyzes the Chinese approach towards the ostensible centrality of ASEAN. However, it goes well beyond this conventional approach to examine the concept of peripheral diplomacy, the role of local governments in China vis-à-vis ASEAN. Above all the project seeks to elucidate relations in Yunnan and the Guangxi Autonomous Region with bordering countries Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam.

Initial observations and impact on the process of integration: The ongoing processes impacting on ASEAN’s ostensible centrality have two aspects: big power politics (USA-China rivalry), as well as endogenous dynamics within the Association itself. ASEAN and the member states use the situation to the fullest in order to gain benefits for themselves. Our initial research would suggest that growing big power competition is the leading force in undermining the centrality of ASEAN. The question is whether ASEAN as a group of countries without, it would seem, a common political identity based on the same political values, might further integrate? External factors such as American laissez – faire capitalism, or China’s developmental model might undermine all the efforts undertaken by ASEAN itself to find some kind of middle way. Both powers believe, that only by imposing their own model of development the region can be secure. For example, China in conducting its relations with Laos and Cambodia has tried to persuade a much broader ASEAN public that the China model of development can deliver public goods. On the contrary, Washington by supporting the democratic transition in Myanmar tries to make the people of ASEAN believe in a US style democratic political model.

From the practical policy orientation, China’s (unstated) efforts at encouraging disintegration is building on the “middle countries” (*zhongjian guojia*) strategy enunciated by the Chinese scholar Shi Yuanhua at Fudan University who argues that while exercising “peripheral diplomacy” China should target three to four countries from ASEAN as “pawns”. In practice, these “pawns” do not conduct one-sided relations with China, but, on the contrary seek to have as good as possible relations with the United States. There is therefore an acknowledgement in Beijing that China recognizes that the majority of ASEAN members do prefer to have stronger strategic relations with the United States than with China. As a consequence, China is interested in limiting the American presence in the region, but at the same time is aware of positioning itself as a counter-hegemon.

Within this context, the role of local governments in China's policy towards ASEAN has been given a fillip under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For example, it can be seen in the actions taken by the central government in Beijing towards Singapore, 'subcontracting' to Chongqing to make it responsible for "attracting" Singaporean investment and trade. A further example is Yunnan province which has the responsibility to manage the so-called "peace process" just over its borders in Kachin and Shan states in Myanmar. Or managing humanitarian crises and fostering cross border trade with the internationalization of the RMB. A final example is that of the Guangxi Administrative Region which has been designated to be a "logistic hub" between ASEAN and Europe, in a sense a further development with Chongqing. It would be misleading to suggest that this division of labour is dictated by the central government in Beijing. Indeed, sometimes the actions taken by local government are made prior to receiving central government agreement. They are not coordinated by the central administration but, rather, as part of the centre-region bargaining process inside China are used as leverage in order to gain more support from the central government itself.

Mierzejewski's work on an external power's impact on regional connectivity is complemented by Nathalie Fau's research on *Maritime connectivity in Southeast Asia and its impact on ASEAN*. Transport links do not only provide physical access to resources, but also enable producers to take advantage of opportunities in domestic and foreign markets, leading to economies of scale and specialization. They also enable consumers to have access to a variety of competitively priced goods, encourage investment, promote social integration and spur trade and economic growth. Furthermore, enhanced ASEAN connectivity narrows the development gaps within the ASEAN region. Ensuring improved connectivity with the less-developed lagging countries and lagging micro-regions within the ASEAN countries can lead to increased opportunities for greater investment, trade and growth. As a result, these micro-regions can realize the potential of their comparative advantage.

ASEAN's Connectivity Plan takes as its starting point the hypothesis that there exists an obvious link between building infrastructure, eliminating the isolation of territories and setting them up in networks, economic development and regional integration in South East Asia. This project questions this hypothesis, by focusing on maritime transport infrastructure. As a region surrounded by sea, the ASEAN countries depend on seaborne transport to facilitate much of its trade. This is also a key to ensuring that the region remains competitive and attractive to investors through facilitating seaborne trade and movement of cargo across maritime supply chains. This is most salient as the region remains an important hub for cargo flows by dint of its prominent location and advanced port infrastructure. To realise ASEAN's lofty ambition to establish the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), it needs an integrated and efficient maritime transport system to facilitate a seamless flow of cargo between the ASEAN member nations. Maritime connectivity in ASEAN is critical and ASEAN has put in place a roadmap to help support the maritime integration of the region. The purpose of this project is, thus, to analyse current connectivity levels in the maritime sector in ASEAN and the challenges that need to be overcome. The project examines connectivity within ASEAN and how ASEAN connects to the rest of the world.

Field work was conducted in Malaysia and focused on ports and shipping companies. The main issues observed so far are:

- Notwithstanding massive port development projects there are doubts about the viability of pouring billions of dollars of investment into an already over-supplied sector
- Growing competition on the shores of the Malacca Straits.
- Increasing Chinese investment into maritime connectivity projects. Port projects with significant Chinese interest are Kuala Linggi International Port (Melaka), the Melaka Gateway project, the Kuantan Port expansion, the Bagan Datoh Port (Perak) and the Penang Port expansion.
- New Indian investment: Carey Island (initially a Chinese project)
- The major role of the international shipping lines and the impact of the new vessel sharing alliances that became operable in April 2017. Major shipping companies have shifted their operations from Port Klang to Singapore under new alliance agreements, notably the Ocean Alliance which includes the Chinese state-owned Cosco shipping company
- In a response to the so-called “Malacca dilemma”, Chinese investment also finances “alternative trade routes” to Singapore. These include the Kuantan port and East Coast Rail Link, the Melaka Gateway, an energy port in Bagan Datoh with an oil pipeline that will cut across Peninsular Malaysia. These projects suggest that China and Malaysia are forming a “port alliance” to fast-track trade by reducing customs bottlenecks at both ends. Under the port alliance, ten Chinese ports (Dalian, Shanghai, Ningbo, Qinzhou, Guangzhou, Fuzhou, Xiamen, Shenzhen, Hainan and Taicang) will collaborate with six Malaysian ports (Port Klang, Malacca, Penang, Johor, Kuantan and Bintulu). The final details are still being worked out, but the development is aimed at improved trade facilitation and integration within the region. However, in the background is a Chinese concern to protect its trade routes.
- The plans to build the two new ports in Melaka and Selangor, alongside the energy port in Perak along with an oil pipeline to Kelantan, as well as the East Coast Rail Link, have had many economists wondering whether they would be able to generate the economic returns to cover the new debts that Malaysia will incur. Initially the Malaysian Prime Minister Mohamed Mahathir in arguing for “fair trade” sought to cancel or postpone these projects.
- The strengthening of proximity trade links, barter trade and Ro-Ro. The Malaysian government is insisting that cargo volumes are set to rise as the country strengthens connectivity with southern Thailand and Sumatra across the Straits of Malacca.

Following from this research, Fau has formulated a number of provisional conclusions on the impact on ASEAN and the process of integration / disintegration. In regard to disintegration there has been increased competition between ASEAN ports to capture business from the flow of container ships and container trade. This competition has been exacerbated by the fact that national interests are prioritised over intra-regional ones. This has hindered developing complementarities between ports who often seek the same types of trade instead of trying to find a niche for themselves. This can result in suboptimal allocation of resources and even redundancies. So, having so many ports in the top thirty does not really mean that connectivity within ASEAN is well established. Because of national sensitivities, all ASEAN member states want to have their respective ports considered as the main hub port for ASEAN. Due to this

fact, unlike intra-straits traffic, where maritime connectivity is minimal, external connectivity - i.e., connectivity with the international markets – is much stronger.

This competition has been exacerbated by the links between maritime infrastructure and projecting geostrategic influence. Japan and China are locked in a strategic and commercial fight on the sea lanes. Moreover, both countries have competing projects, for example the BRI versus Asia-Africa Growth Corridor. Another external partner, India, is promoting an ASEAN-India Connectivity Plan to counter China's BRI, Sittwe port. For Japan promoting the Indo-Pacific construct there is an overlap with its priority maritime spaces. While the Indo-Pacific is a popular geopolitical concept it lacks an economic architecture.

Competition over transshipment activities: many port cities of ASEAN are becoming increasingly dependent upon Chinese trade or transit but simultaneously, China has not yet become the dominant hub of Asia, despite the spectacular growth in its export trade. Not less than one-fifth of global container shipping is related to China, which moreover currently hosts most of the top 20 container ports in the world. However, the main function of Chinese ports was to serve the domestic market, without the ambition to supersede existing hubs for international transshipment. On the contrary, there is a growing competition in ASEAN to create new transshipment hubs. Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam, have announced plans to invest heavily in port infrastructure. This could result in over supply: the container-shipment industry has reached a plateau, and in a very competitive environment there is a risk of excess capacity. A further question addressed in Fau's research is whether the weight of China in the financing of ASEAN infrastructure has engendered divisiveness within ASEAN.

The ASEAN Master Plan for Connectivity (AMPC) and BRI have major shared goals. Both consider transport connectivity as a way of bringing countries closer together and improving access to trade and investment. Like the BRI project, the AMPC calls for a system of ports to link members of the ASEAN with one another. Given that the ASEAN countries are situated directly in the middle of the Maritime Silk Road's (MSR) path this will have significant implications for the ASEAN region's geopolitical landscape. As more than 90 percent of global trade is carried on sea routes, maritime connectivity within Southeast Asia would potentially play a major role in strengthening the importance of the region. A serious concern in Southeast Asia is that China may use economic incentives as a tool to engulf these countries in forms of cooperation that will threaten the ASEAN way and ASEAN unity. The ASEAN countries remain sceptical about the MSR. The question is whether China will make use of proximity and contiguity by sea to foster mutually beneficial ties or whether, under the guise of the MSR, China will further its own geostrategic objectives and project its economic and maritime power. Yet, at the same time they do not want to miss the opportunities provided by the BRI to fill critical gaps in their infrastructure something that would be of immense benefit.

As for the ASEAN connectivity plan it is not accepted with equal enthusiasm throughout ASEAN. For example, Indonesia, aspiring to be a global maritime fulcrum, launched the Sea Toll Road project to improve national connectivity within the archipelago. However, currently, Indonesia's maritime fulcrum is mostly inward-looking and not outward oriented. It is designed

as a developmental strategy to narrow the economic gap in the archipelago and planned to enhance inter-island connectivity and strengthen the port infrastructure of the country.

The phenomena observed by Fau have had a three-fold integrative impact on ASEAN:

1. Improving maritime connectivity with fellow neighbouring ASEAN countries through proximity trade links. Distances between ports across Indonesia, which stretches around 4,800km from Aceh in the west to Papua in the east, are a factor in the country's poor transport performance. To offset the impact of these distances, Indonesia and the Philippines are aiming to develop port and seaborne trade links between the eastern islands of Indonesia and the Philippines, particularly Mindanao, a southern Philippine island that is much closer to eastern Indonesia than to Java or Sumatra.
2. The Development of the nautical highway system (through enhanced use of Ro-Ro vessels). The use of Ro-Ro vessels is important in supporting sea shipping over short destinations, connecting archipelagic countries, improving the connectivity between continental and maritime Southeast Asia as well creating “highways of the sea”. These will enable not only domestic connectivity for archipelagic countries such as Indonesia or the Philippines, but also link ASEAN’s island countries with their continental neighbours.
3. Much of the bilateral maritime trade today is being handled by non-conventional vessels and not necessarily by container ships. For example, the policies of the governments of Indonesia and Malaysia have contributed to the development of small ports specializing in barter trade. This trade entails a form of commerce based on compensation or exchange of goods. The goal of these policies is to allow the coastal populations, which are often isolated from the large cities to have access to basic goods, raw materials and equipment. This is the principle of barter trade, often requiring no shipping documents and conducted without money changing hands. Despite flourishing, barter trade activities tend to be invisible to the authorities, yet they have a major impact on improved connectivity.

Andrea Valente is conducting a research project on *Energy, security and cooperation in ASEAN*. Energy security underpins almost every pillar upon which the ASEAN community is being built. It is right at the intersection between the economic, social, political and military spheres. One of the main assumptions underlying this project is that, contrary to official narratives, policies to deepen cooperation have proven difficult to implement and stay far behind expectations. Against this context, the main research question is why ASEAN has been unable to deepen cooperation in the energy field, despite apparent determination and a theoretical necessity to do so?

Andrea Valente’s research objectives are twofold. On the one hand, she seeks to explain the relationship between resource nationalism, energy cooperation and energy security. On the other hand, she seeks to understand why ASEAN has been unable to deepen cooperation in the energy field, despite apparent determination and a need to do so. After proposing a definition

of what is considered resource nationalism, the study is confronted with data derived from field work.

Preliminary findings for the three countries so far examined are as follows:

1. Indonesia: Resource nationalism policies have been adopted with the purpose of safeguarding national resource development. Nevertheless, the government's policies have not been conducive to fostering energy security nor are they even guided by that goal. No major advancements have been made to reduce the over-reliance on fossil fuels, neither on the demand nor the supply side. For Indonesia, given the paucity of these domestic results, a push towards deepening energy cooperation through ASEAN seems a distant prospect.
2. Thailand: The Thai government is also compelled to negotiate with energy companies, but government and business groups' interests are not antagonistic, and policymakers will mostly retain an edge in the bargaining. In this case, there is a clear drive towards pursuing energy security goals by enhancing regional cooperation.
3. Malaysia: Policymakers have adopted suitable and integrated energy policies to underpin their long-term objectives namely a continued and sustainable energy supply. Energy policymaking is less targeted by influences from business groups, and gears towards ensuring energy security.

Valente's research provides an important contribution to understanding the evolution of ASEAN. Given that Southeast Asia is a region organized with countries each following their own practices of resource nationalism (RN), the challenges to developing an intra-regional approach are systemic. Her research aims to understand the reason why ASEAN has been unable to deepen cooperation in the energy field, despite apparent determination and theoretical necessity to do so.

This situation has important implications for the dialectic of integration and disintegration within ASEAN. Conceptually, RN refers to a situation in which a country (normally through its state-owned enterprises) 'nationalizes' the objective of securing energy supplies (by exploring and producing domestically and purchasing energy sources from abroad). In cases where energy security is the overarching goal, states can opt for resource nationalism and simultaneously pursue regional energy cooperation. Conversely, the more countries instrumentalize the control of energy resources to conceal goals other than energy security, the less inclined they will be to cooperate. This is particularly the case when they are subject to the pressure of domestic vested interests. Empirically, the energy policies of some ASEAN member states reflect indeed pure RN. However, this means facilitating regional energy cooperation to strengthen national energy security. Yet others, for example Indonesia, invoke RN to pursue self-enrichment by domestic politico-business elites, resulting in an insufficient commitment to energy cooperation through ASEAN.

**Module n° 4** examines integration with new domestic / foreign interfaces, based on two case studies, Timor Leste and Myanmar. The perception and reality of ASEAN's development as a regional entity is called into question from many quarters. The internal contestation is apparent in the case of Myanmar while the external challenge is clear in the case of Timor-Leste. The two contributions of this research group seek to demonstrate how the ASEAN integration narrative is challenged by dissident voices.

Timor-Leste is a small country in which elites built much of their status and power through external networks. For them, ASEAN is vital, but so are other actors/partners. A *small state* and particularly an island state is constrained by several factors. Thus, there is an effort to compensate and overcome these constraints through constant negotiation with the outside world. Timor-Leste is an example of this negotiation at the global level, negotiations which demonstrate at the same time strength and a weakness. The East-Timorese application to join ASEAN can be analyzed as a test-case of *polarization* and *fragmentation* in the competing regional integration/disintegration process. It can also be interpreted as disruptive of an ASEAN 'standard of civilization'. How does Timor's membership application contribute to strengthening or weakening ASEAN's integration?

Paulo Castro Seixas and Nuno Canas Mendes' research describes and explains the framework of East Timorese plural external interests through bilateral and multilateral networks and their influence in the process of an ASEAN candidacy.<sup>42</sup> There is a plurality of external interests that express the geopolitical place of a small country that finds itself stuck between giants. This uncomfortable situation is both a consequence of, and impacts on, the political and sociological situation in Timor Leste itself. The research project examines the interest in diverse international/regional integration options (ASEAN, the Pacific Islands Forum, etc.)

One of the main aims of a first research project is to describe and explain the framework of East Timor's plural external interests as expressed in its participation in bilateral and multilateral networks and their influence in the process of its ASEAN membership application. The controversial questions arising from this application are:

- 1) Is Timor-Leste prepared to join the organization?
- 2) Will the admission of Timor-Leste to ASEAN be a cause of a slowdown in the pace of its own integration?
- 3) What will be the positive effects for the region and for Timor-Leste?

These questions are linked with new extra-regional dynamics, since Timor-Leste is at the crossroads of various regions. Our aim is to explain the reasons for the delay of admission and to highlight the numerous grounds on which this case is based.

A second project deals with *Imagined (International) Communities and the Narcissism of Small Differences: (dis)junctive regional gazes in Timor-Leste*

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<sup>42</sup> The first results of this research have been published in Paulo Castro Seixas, Nuno Canas Mendes & Nadine Lobner, "The 'Readiness' of Timor-Leste: Narratives about the Admission Procedure to ASEAN" *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 38 (2), 2019, pp. 149-171.

The evolution of the Timor-Leste candidacy to ASEAN -specifically its historical, political and bureaucratic context - demonstrates how Timor-Leste's application (formally submitted in 2011) contrasts with the application processes of the 1990s involving Cambodia, Lao, Myanmar and Vietnam. A particular comparison is made with Myanmar. The political analysis of the arguments supporting Timor-Leste's application by several ASEAN member states (Thailand; the Philippines; Cambodia and Indonesia) contrasted with those emanating from the countries opposed to its membership (Singapore; Lao PDR; Malaysia and Vietnam) illustrates the "integration/exclusion nexus" of regional integration. They also show how scholarship on standards of civilization<sup>43</sup> and those pertaining to imagined international communities<sup>44</sup> provide insights in understanding processes of regional integration.

This research will also focus on the behaviour of the Timorese elites towards ASEAN by asking the question: how do they identify with ASEAN? A political-administrative analysis of the application process from their perspective provides explanations on why ASEAN membership is a priority for Timor-Leste, for its strengths, weaknesses and strategies. It is also of particular interest to identify the divisive questions that Timor-Leste's application raised. ASEAN is not the only option for Timor. It is therefore necessary to identify the crossroads situation of Timor-Leste in-between CPLP (*Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa*), ASEAN and PIF/MSG (Pacific Islands Forum and Melanesia Spearhead Group). This double-bind integration and its potential consequences in any regional integration will be analysed. The fact that East Timor is a country 'playing' in several arenas is often presented as an asset. Yet to pursue this question we need to examine the Timorese from 'inside' and the Timorese from 'outside' (counter-diasporas).

WP5's final research project concerns Myanmar. In becoming a member of ASEAN in 1997, Myanmar governments – operating within an evolving hybrid political system - have had to respond to the changing circumstances in the country's regional strategic environment and reform Myanmar's domestic political system in order to comply with ASEAN norms. However, most of the studies on Myanmar integrating ASEAN and its norms fail to explain how Myanmar leaders evaluated - and responded to - the pressure from fellow ASEAN members to implement a new form of governance. They focused on ASEAN itself and, notably, on ASEAN's flexibility in applying its non-interference principle in dealing with Myanmar's democratization process<sup>45</sup> or on the negotiations allowing humanitarian aid to flow into the country when Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008<sup>46</sup>.

Moe Mama's research adopts a domestic angle and explains how Myanmar's leaders considered the pressure from fellow ASEAN members and why they decided to adjust their political system to meet ASEAN standards and accepted ASEAN's assistance during the natural crisis of 2008.

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<sup>43</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, Oxford, Wiley Blackwell, 2000.

<sup>44</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, London, Verso, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Marchi, Ludovica *ASEAN vis-à-vis Myanmar: what influences at play?* The London School of Economics and Political Science, Centre for International Studies, London, 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Amador III, Julio Santiago "Community Building at the Time of Nargis: The ASEAN Response", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 28, 4, 2009, pp. 3-22.

Ongoing research is focusing on the vision of Myanmar's leaders and their perception of ASEAN's role in the above-mentioned issues. In-depth interviews focus on state and non-state actors in Myanmar, their perceptions as well as domestic responses to ASEAN's role in this transitional period. This analysis includes examining the domestic-ASEAN nexus in dealing with the communal crisis in Rakhine State. The Rohingya issue is a crisis that has an impact on ASEAN integration since, as former Indonesian Foreign minister Marty Natalegawa argued "ASEAN hasn't provided a bridging situation. In fact, ASEAN itself has been divided."<sup>47</sup> Field research conducted at present explores how ASEAN as a regional organization and individual member states responded to the Rakhine crisis and how this issue has had an impact on ASEAN's integration process.

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<sup>47</sup> ASEAN must go further than aid on Rakhine State: Marty Natalegawa, <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/asean-must-go-further-than-aid-on-rakhine-state-marty-natalegawa>