

CHALLENGES TO ASEAN MULTILATERALISM AND INITIATIVES TO ITS IMPROVEMENT

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Abstract

Multilateralism and ASEAN multilateral organization are currently facing a lot of debate about their content as well as their actual role. The article will clarify the content of multilateralism and clarify what ASEAN has done and failed to do as an important multilateral organization in Asia, thereby proposing some solutions to overcome those difficulties of ASEAN.

Keywords: *ASEAN, Liberalism, Multilateralism.*

1. Introduction

ASEAN is an institution realized by the theory of multilateralism. Therefore, the article will be divided into three main parts: Inheriting some views on multilateralism that the authors accept, thereby clarifying and adding more connotations to multilateralism. Overview of the multilateral spirit of ASEAN, survey the actual achievements that the ASEAN multilateral institution has achieved; In addition, it points to the failures encountered by this organization that threatens its mission to bring good multilateral results to the region. Offer several initiatives for ASEAN to improve its multilateralism.

2. Method

The article mainly uses qualitative methods; In addition, some available quantitative data are used to support the authors' argument.

3. Results

3.1. An overview of multilateralism

Today, multilateralism is an ideology, a familiar reality that mankind, in general, is aiming to perfect. Quantitatively, multilateralism is “the coordinated diplomatic interaction” of at least three actors (usually states (Keohane, 1990)) “in international politics” (Maull, 2020). Qualitatively, multilateralism must have a system of ideas (Maull, 2020) about common interests among actors, thereby forming common values, common goals, and common commitments among those actors (Britannica Encyclopedia, n.d.). Thus,

multilateralism is a product with the colors of liberalism and constructivism, distinct from unilateralism, bilateralism, and realism. Specifically:

Multilateralism is realized by a clear institution that the participants voluntarily agree to. There is no coercion by hard power from any actors inside or outside the multilateral institutional alliance. The position and role of each member are almost equal, so the powerful influence of each member is almost equal.

A multilateral institution is formed to increase interests or to solve problems that one member cannot handle. It can be the construction of some new interests or the protection of existing interests that one actor (unilateral) or two actors (bilateral) in the multilateral community cannot do. Although each subject pursues its interests, all understand that the individual interests of each member lie in the common interests of the multilateral community to which they are voluntarily attached.

The actors participating in the multilateral mechanism accept a clear, common rule of the game, whose outcome should always be win-win for the members. The operation of the multilateral institution that the actors build is transparent, predictable, and the definitive outcome must be in the common interest of all members of that multilateral community.

The establishment mechanism, as well as the changing movement of the multilateral institution, has always been: the appearance of an idea of some value -> thereby forming the principles of conduct -> forming the transparent (even predictable) behavior of members.

If problems arise between members, the solution is always peaceful, conciliatory, and amicable. This is one of the important criteria of multilateralism because the existence of any multilateral institution is aimed at protecting a common heritage of peace, good values (maybe community identity), and common public goods (France Diplomacy, 2020).

Multilateralism is a statement that globalization of certain values is utopian, while regionalization of certain values is possible; In today's world, unilateralism is fraught with danger, and bilateralism is not safe enough in terms of security and economy.

3.2. ASEAN with regional multilateralism

3.2.1. Aspiration towards multilateralism of ASEAN

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was officially established on 8/8/1967 with 5 members: Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Philippines; By 1999, the number of members of this organization reached 10, due to many other countries participating as follows: Brunei Darussalam (joined in 1984), Vietnam (joined in 1995), Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia (joined in 1999). And on December 31, 2015, the ASEAN community was officially established (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, n.d.a).

As early as 1967, ASEAN issued its Declaration with specific aims and purposes of multilateralism as follows: “To accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region through joint endeavours in the spirit of equality and partnership in order to strengthen the foundation for a prosperous and peaceful community of Southeast Asian Nations; To promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries of the region and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter; To promote active collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interest in the economic, social, cultural, technical, scientific and administrative fields; To provide assistance to each other in the form of training and research facilities in the educational, professional, technical and administrative spheres; To collaborate more effectively for the greater utilisation of their agriculture and industries, the expansion of their trade, including the study of the problems of international commodity trade, the improvement of their transportation and communications facilities and the raising of the living standards of their peoples; To promote Southeast Asian studies; and To maintain close and beneficial cooperation with existing international and regional organisations with similar aims and purposes, and explore all avenues for even closer cooperation among themselves” (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, n.d.a).

The ASEAN Charter issued in 2008 set out 15 goals, but in general, they all revolved around the above 7 basic things. In addition, ASEAN's work towards these goals is governed by the following fundamental multilateral principles: “Mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity of all nations; The right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion; Non-interference in the internal affairs of one another; Settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful manner; Renunciation of the threat or use of force; and Effective cooperation among themselves” (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, n.d.a).

In terms of organization to realize the above goals and principles, “the ASEAN Community is comprised of three pillars, namely the ASEAN Political-Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community, and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. Each pillar has its Blueprint, and, together with the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Strategic Framework and IAI Work Plan Phase II (2009-2015), they form the Roadmap for an ASEAN Community 2009-2015” (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, n.d.a).

It can be seen that the idea of an ASEAN multilateral institution has been introduced since 1967 with full of common interests in security, economy, politics, culture, and society. Not only that, with the gradual expansion of members and the establishment of action organizations to realize common interests, ASEAN is demonstrating the maturity of a multilateral institution with achievements in more than the past 50 years as:

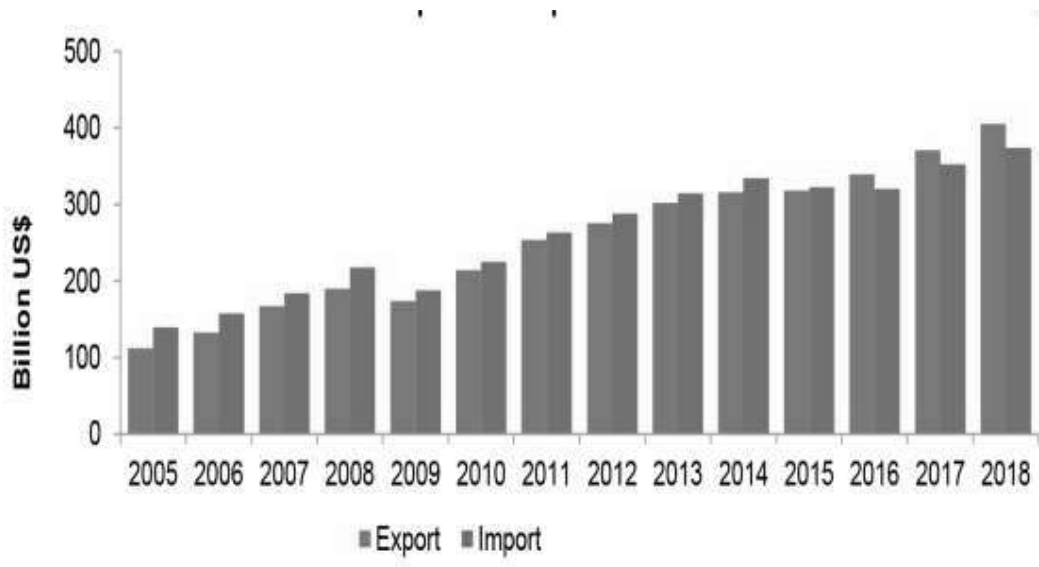
It has preserved (relative) peace and stability in the region (Pakpahan, n.d.).

It has also adopted the ASEAN Convention on Counter-Terrorism in 2007, the ASEAN Convention against Trafficking in Persons in 2015 (Pakpahan, n.d.).

There are several useful areas of cooperation such as: “maritime security, humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping operations, disaster response, counter-terrorism, cybersecurity, and military medicine” (Pakpahan, n.d.).

Economically, statistics show that the ASEAN community has good growth in GDP, especially in the service sector:

ASEAN’s Export and Import of Services

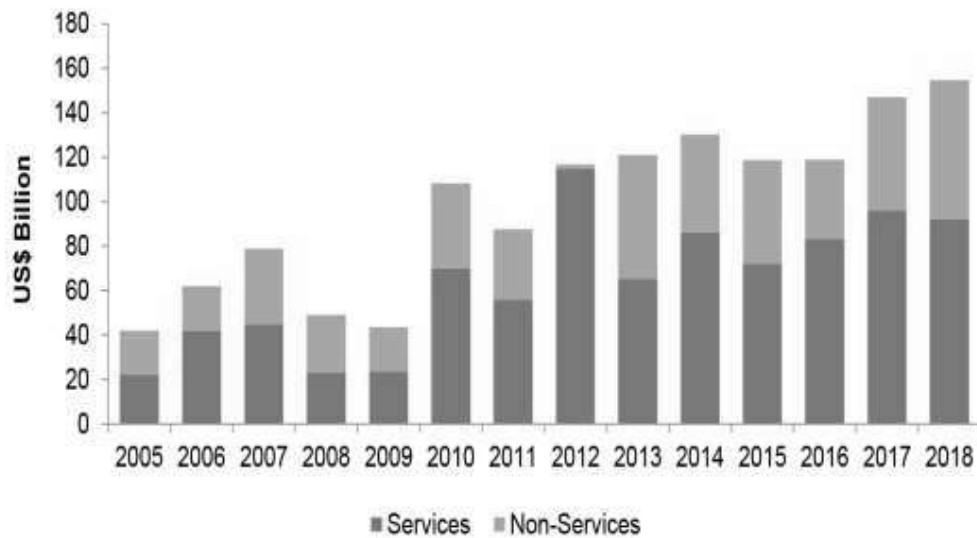


Source: <https://asean.org/asean-economic-community/sectoral-bodies-under-the-purview-of-aem/services/>

The chart above shows that ASEAN's service exports have always grown steadily at a rate of more than 10% a year (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, n.d.b); Although the chart shows a trend of imports outperforming exports, from 2016 onward, ASEAN has become a trade surplus in services.

The service industry is also the place to receive a lot of foreign direct investment (FDI) as shown in the following chart:

FDI Inflow to ASEAN by Sector



Source: <https://asean.org/asean-economic-community/sectoral-bodies-under-the-purview-of-aem/services/>

In the future, ASEAN will certainly maintain these achievements. However, unlike it was in the 1960s, “today, ASEAN is larger, and its agenda has expanded considerably to extra-regional issues and actors covering the wider Asia-Pacific region. The grouping is both more diverse and divided” (Acharya, n.d.). Therefore, ASEAN multilateralism has encountered difficulties as discussed in the following section.

3.2.2. *The difficult reality of ASEAN multilateralism*

According to Hanns Maull, “the inherent difficulties and limitations of multi-lateralism are often underestimated, and its potential overestimated” (Maull, 2020). This is not surprising, since the ideology of multilateralism was born not very long ago in human history. Therefore, the current multilateral institutions are rife with criticisms both in terms of their operating principles as well as their operational reality. ASEAN is no exception, at a glance, some limitations of ASEANism can be seen as follows:

Security:

The cluster of ASEAN countries forms an important and strategic transportation position and is adjacent to two great powers, China and India, moreover, this region always attracts the attention of many other great powers in the world both in history and in the present. Therefore, many countries in the ASEAN group are directly or indirectly involved in the troubles of territorial sovereignty and territorial waters (Mahmood, 2018).

The most specific and obvious is the issue of China imposing unreasonable and illegal claims and actions in the East Sea, such as its claims to sovereignty over the East Sea

within the nine-dash line, the announcement of international tenders 9 oil and gas blocks are located deep in the continental shelf of Vietnam, provoked by sending drilling rigs and fishing fleets to invade the waters of some ASEAN countries, etc. This behavior, unfortunately, did not receive the unanimous objection of all ASEAN countries. Specifically, Brunei and Cambodia fully support the view that China solves the above sovereignty issues through bilateral relations between China and each relevant country (Quang, 2016). This completely goes against the spirit of multilateralism of ASEAN, which so far shows that the division of views on the national security of the countries in this organization is completely real. The world understands that China is implementing the strategy of dividing and conquering ASEAN (Mcbeth, 2020), and the fate of ASEAN multilateralism is very fragile when it cannot have a common voice to protect the sovereignty of its members.

The turmoil in Myanmar also shows the weakness of ASEAN multilateralism. When the people of this country are daily shedding blood and sacrificing their lives to protest the unreasonable military coup and desperately call for the help of the international community, ASEAN shows its “the impotence of ASEAN governments in dealing with a regional crisis” (Idrus, 2021). That is the comment of “six prominent former and current lawmakers from Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand. They are Cambodian opposition leader Sam Rainsy, Indonesian lawmaker Fadli Zon, Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, Filipino Senator Kiko Pangilinan, former Singaporean lawmaker Charles Chong, and Kasit Piromya, former prime minister of Thailand” (Idrus, 2021). They also criticized that “all other ASEAN governments are demonstrating a lack of political will and unity to pressure the military junta to end the killings” (Idrus, 2021), because multilateralism ASEAN has been “handicapped by the self-imposed doctrine of non-interference” (Idrus, 2021).

Only the above two outstanding cases show that, so far, “ASEAN AS a community has been a failure so far, as the notion of national sovereignty continues to undermine its integration while the identity of the grouping has yet to crystallize, according to Eduardo C Tadem, an associate professor of Asian Studies at the University of the Philippines Diliman” (Rojanaphruk, 2013).

It is a failure of ASEAN multilateralism when it fails to protect the sovereignty of its members and does not protect the human rights of its people.

Economy:

Economically, there are many problems within ASEAN as well, according to Ishtiaq Pasha Mahmood (Professor at the National University of Singapore Business School and Co-curator of the ASEAN Transformation Map): “Entrenched interests with the large conglomerates, paired with widespread corruption, is undermining the region's business environment and is particularly hurtful for small enterprises” (Mahmood, 2018). The

following table shows that although corruption rates are not uniform across ASEAN countries, this is a significant problem in many countries:



Source: <https://aseanrbf.org/newsroom/news-press-release/1286-instilling-the-culture-of-business-integrity-and-anti-corruption-in-asean>

The disparity in economic living standards among members is also huge, in 2017 the World Bank said that “while 98% of adults in Singapore and 85% in Malaysia had a bank account, just 22% of Cambodian adults and 26% Burmese adults did” (Mahmood, 2018).

The economic integration process of the ASEAN multilateral region is also weakened by the realist competition among the member countries. According to Eduardo C Tadem (an associate professor of Asian Studies), the competition is fierce, while Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand even outnumber other countries to the point of achieving intra-ASEAN trade dominance (accounting for about approx. 70%) (Rojanaphruk, 2013).

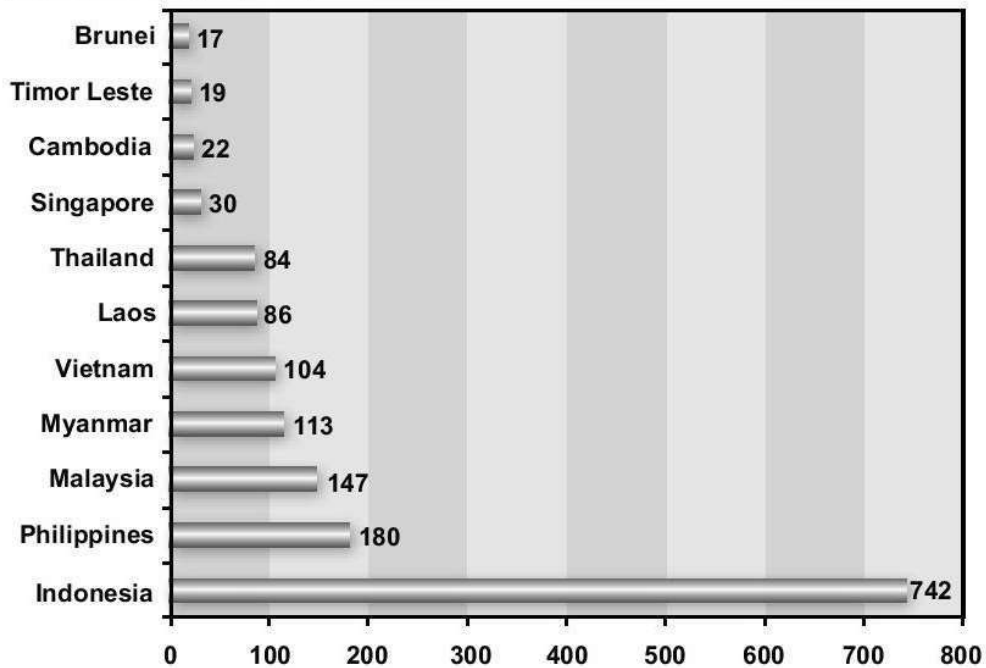
Roderick Macdonald points out that the threat to ASEAN multilateralism is worse, because “states pursue bilateral or trilateral arrangements rather than building a supranational practice. This is evident in the political economy of the ASEAN states, where the attempt to achieve an ASEAN economic community masks an actual practice of growing bilateralism and the fragmentation rather than integration of the ASEAN political economy together with the growing dependence of these smaller states on the wider region’s illiberal economic powerhouse, China” (Macdonald, 2019). That shows: “crucial norm of non-interference and its practice of nonbinding consensus inhibit deeper integration either within ASEAN” (Macdonald, 2019).

Besides vital security, economics is an essential reason for forming any multilateral alliance. Failure to ensure the legitimate interests and equality of alliance members will make the ASEAN institutional bloc likely to exist only in name.

Sociocultural:

A common identity is what ASEAN as well as all other multilateral institutions aspire to. However, to become a reality, this is quite difficult given the tremendous cultural diversity among ASEAN countries today. The statistics below show it just in terms of language:

Figure 1. Estimated Numbers of Languages Spoken in Southeast Asian Countries
(Source: Ethnologue, 2005)



Source: <https://foxhugh.com/2012/03/23/asean-cultural-diverstiy/>

In addition, “income inequality and wealth concentration, discrimination, food insecurity, ongoing human rights challenges and environmental degradation” (Mercado, 2018) are also a problem in each member and throughout ASEAN (Mercado, 2018).

Right now, the COVID-19 epidemic is also proving the weakness of ASEAN's leadership mechanism, demonstrating the need to restructure this organization as commented by Herman Joseph S. Kraft (Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of the Philippines) (Kraft, 2020).

3.3. Some suggestions for the development of ASEAN multilateralism

The problems that ASEAN is facing above show that the current multilateralism is difficult to completely break up/opposite from realism and bilateralism, but can only rely on and apply the theory is dominating international politics to continue to preserve and build this regional multilateral institution only (however, the result must be the common interest, the common identity of the actors in accordance with the objectives of liberalism and

constructivism). In that spirit, some suggestions for ASEAN multilateralism are given as follows:

Building a common security organization with the participation of ASEAN peacekeepers, and with the participation of observers and consultants from the US, China, and Russia:

The world in general and the Asia region, in particular, have not yet been able (and probably cannot) to have eternal peace. Therefore, a military force is essential to keep the peace and to keep the peace in the face of a world full of actors willing to use realism in foreign affairs. ASEAN countries should build a common armed force with a peacekeeping mission for members in their region. This armed force has the presence of all ASEAN countries and rotates in countries, especially in hot spots that require military presence. In the current situation, the above force needs to be urgently established and must be present in Myanmar to protect the people and media about the truth in this country. In addition, an ASEAN naval force must be established quickly to solve the complicated maritime issues in the Vietnamese East Sea.

This earth for thousands of years has always been the playground of the great powers, they have always been the main subjects regulating the direction of mankind. Reality also shows that ASEAN always fails in security and sovereignty situations when it has to confront issues with certain superpowers behind them. Therefore, it is necessary to actively bring those big countries to the public so that they can partly predict the movements of that power. In addition, power can only be controlled by power, so it is necessary to invite all three current superpowers, the US, Russia, and China to participate (at least to advise and observe) on the security issues of the ASEAN region to somewhat limit the status of an autocratic superpower in any issue.

Since then, ASEAN can handle the problem of crime and solve some sovereignty and defense issues in the region peacefully. Such an open multilateral mechanism is safer and more realistic than the current glamor and weakness of ASEAN multilateralism.

Establishment of ASEAN universities:

Ishtiaq Pasha Mahmood (Professor at the National University of Singapore Business School and Co-Curator of the ASEAN Transformation Map) said: “ASEAN is home to young, literate and increasingly urbanized and aspirational populations” (Mahmood, 2018), and asks “governments must help prepare young people to face the demands of an increasingly integrated economic region, through education and training” (Mahmood, 2018).

To speed up this process, although there are many educational mechanisms established by ASEAN, it is necessary to promote the construction of universities named ASEAN Universities and ASEAN Intermediate Schools to train professionals and skilled

workers that ASEAN countries currently and will need to employ. These educational institutions receive full scholarships, study in English, and are guaranteed jobs in the countries of the bloc right after graduation. But the trainees must commit to working for at least 5 years abroad after completing the training program. This will help countries have local resources, and enhance mutual understanding between people in the region, in order to help ASEAN multilateralism be built “from the bottom-up”, not “from the top-down” as it is today.

Strengthen communication in ASEAN with art products:

Art is also an important tool to help people in ASEAN get to know each other better. In the context of the current booming demand for art entertainment, there is a great need for painting, photography, and drama products, especially short clips and feature films for people of different countries to enjoy and through which more honest and friendly knowledge about the culture of ASEAN countries.

Social networking apps Facebook, Tiktok, Instagram, etc. and TV dramas, short messages on news conveying information about ASEAN culture need to appear more often with attractive and impressive forms, which will greatly help people understand more about countries in the region, and from there, the work to close the cultural gap between the members of the bloc will be possible. There should be favorable mechanisms (even monetary rewards) for people to actively create and post to share their cultural content with people from other countries in the region. Governments, no matter how hard they try, cannot use their power to force people to understand and integrate culture, this can only be done through a natural and spontaneous way among people.

Encourage bilateral relations within ASEAN:

Multilateralism should not be viewed as the opposite of bilateralism. It must be understood that if bilateral relations are beneficial or at least do not harm multilateral relations, multilateral institutions can still be used. Therefore, it is necessary to encourage bilateral relations within ASEAN, especially economic relations, in order to help countries have closer relationships with each other, more beneficial for the alliance countries. Roderick Macdonald also asserts that: “The proliferation of additional bilateral treaties between member nations and other countries outside of ASEAN, as well as multilateral treaties between ASEAN or several members and other countries, does not contradict the purpose of the ASEAN Economic Community but can reinforce the pursuit of the region’s prosperity” (Macdonald, 2019).

Encouraging bilateral relations also means understanding that each country always follows its realist interests. However, if it is only bilateral between the countries within ASEAN, then this is using realism as a means to serve the goal of the common interest desired by liberalism.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, multilateralism in ASEAN has been an on-going process and faced many challenges. Although such difficulties have the potential to make this institution nominal, there are approaches that ASEAN can take on to improve its multilateral mechanism. An important approach is to further strengthen bilateral relations among members in order to achieve accessible understanding towards mutual issues. If the ASEAN member states are willing to work truthfully with each other in the collective mindset of creating a mutual identity of the region, these issues might be reduced and worked forwards to preserve and improve the institutional multilateralism.

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