

## **THE ASEAN SECURITY COMMUNITY**

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Let me put the notion of a security community, with all that it requires, aside momentarily and look just at security in Southeast Asia, and set it in the context of time and space.

If we look at it from the viewpoint of time, Southeast Asia has come a long way today compared to what we were after the WW2 when most of us became independent nations. Southeast Asia then was an unstable, highly volatile region, with violence and conflict afflicting almost every country internally as well as in the external domain. In the early decades of our independent existence our own people fought each other in many countries; some countries attacked each other; some occupied another; we subverted each other; we hosted, willingly or involuntarily, insurgent groups that attacked our neighbour, and we allowed third countries bases and space to bomb neighbouring countries. We were deeply suspicious of each other. We were caught up in a global ideological war and Southeast Asia was divided between a hostile communist Southeast Asia and non-communist Southeast Asia. We did not know that even if we differed politically, we could co-exist peacefully.

This was a region of conflict in the 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, even 80s. Not only was there no security community, there was no security. All this changed specially with the 90s and now the first decade of the new century. This is a region essentially at peace, within national borders as well as between nations, and between Southeast Asia and the rest of the world. Considering that this is largely still a poor and developing region, with nation states just five decades old, this is a remarkable achievement.

This when we view Southeast Asia security in terms of time. In terms of space, the situation has also changed profoundly. Where once Southeast Asia was one of many regions of conflict, instability and tensions, today we are close to the European and North American continent in terms of security. This is no self-serving exaggeration but objective fact. The U.S in fact is very insecure today,

and the odd conflicts continue to beset Europe. Southeast Asia is far more stable and peaceful than Northeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia or the Middle East, and large portions in Africa.

From the perspectives of both time and space therefore, Southeast Asia is doing remarkably well. Without articulating it as such, we have in fact been gradually building a security community in Southeast Asia even since ASEAN was established through our notion of comprehensive security resting on national and regional resilience, ZOPFAN, SEANWFZ and TAC.

With Bali Concord II, Southeast Asia set itself new targets. We want to build a community in the comprehensive sense – socio-cultural, economic and security. It is a vision and goal worthy of the peoples of Southeast Asia. In my view, everyday, bit by bit, we are indeed building this community because we have our values and priorities right.

This is what is required first and foremost in the building of a community, security or otherwise – to get our values, principles and priorities right. The rest flow from this. Not everywhere, not in every country maybe, but generally we got it right. Except perhaps in the case of Myanmar, in very other country the priorities are issues related to economic development – education and human capital development, competitiveness, trade, investment, etc. In the relations between countries the primary impulses are conducive to peace and security – cooperation, respect for sovereignty, peaceful settlement of disputes, little emphasis on the military option and generally low military expenditure.

While we may have got our values and priorities right, however, the countries of Southeast Asia face a number of important challenges in building a stronger and more resilient ASEAN Security Community as envisaged in Bali Concord II:-

1. National resilience – The ASEAN countries are generally much more resilient now after five decades of progress in nation-building, economic development and peace building. For virtually all ASEAN countries however, strengthening national resilience in the form of nation-building

remains the most important challenge. Building nations out of diverse peoples through fortifying national consensus, closing serious and fatal ethnic divides, resolving ethnic and religious issues, and addressing insurgency and marginalisation, remain core challenges in the ASEAN region.

In this regard, Bali Concord II does not give sufficient emphasis to building up national resilience as the key approach to strengthening regional resilience in the ASEAN Security Community. Its focus is more on relations between the ASEAN countries rather than on domestic measures, this is understandable because ASEAN is essentially about cooperation *between* regional states.

Where it does focus on matters related to national resilience, it highlights issues such as the rule of law and human rights, and not the need to fortify the foundations of nation-building in regional states. The other issues that the security community component addresses, such as terrorism, transnational crime, human trafficking, AIDS and corruption, are more relevant to security rather than to nation-building, though they do contribute to the latter.

2. Bilateral relations – A network of strong and peaceful bilateral relations is fundamental to the emergence of our ASEAN Security Community. As stated earlier, great strides forward have been made here, but problems remain. One of them is overcoming our historical baggage – ancient and more recent experiences and memories of conflict, rivalry, contests over territory and borders, even occupation. In some cases this also ties in with feelings of insecurity occasioned by size, demographic differences and power differentials. There is a great need to improve trust and confidence, deficits in which sometimes influence defence policies, building up of very high military and defence capabilities, and defence engagements with outside powers to address subjective feelings of insecurity and the perceived need to ‘balance’ neighbours. This can impact negatively on national and regional self-reliance, and become a source of differences.

A genuine and credible security community cannot exist when members of the community have to rely upon outside powers to 'balance' other members of the community. A security community should ideally rely upon itself for its success, and not upon others.

This is not to criticise or blame any particular country. In fact, no single country is "responsible," in the sense that the lack of trust between neighbours and the need to 'balance' neighbours is the consequence of history, demography and geographical size.

3. Territorial disputes – should receive greater priority and attention in strengthening security community, because they are primordial in nature and have easy potential for triggering military conflict. We can recall, for instance, how even between very close neighbours and friends like Malaysia and Indonesia, the Ambalat issue re-ignited decades-old feelings of enmity and hostility. There are other latent and slumbering hostilities awaiting us perhaps in the relations between other neighbours as well.

Expedite dispute settlement. One of better options is to seek recourse in legal instruments of dispute settlement – ICJ.

4. Strategic and threat perceptions – Must allow for differences and respect each other's distinctive concerns, because these often arise from factors such as proximity and history. But it would be good for the ASEAN Security Community if members could approximate their security as much as possible, because serious differences can undermine the resilience of the security community and create tensions in foreign policy and security policy. Can work at cross purposes. Primary factor is perceptions of the challenge or threat posed by China, and the differences in responses to it. The differences can have a far reaching impact, such as on ASEAN's efforts to build an East Asian community – conflict between ASEAN Plus Three and East Asia Summit.

Approximating our perceptions on China particularly urgent, because depending upon how we perceive China, we can “hedge” with outside powers in a manner that would have detrimental impact upon regional stability and security – potential instability and tension with China because of involvement in other major powers’ agendas.

5. Strengthening Dispute Settlement Mechanisms - Programme of Action norms and institutions of TAC regime – Bali Concord II: “TAC is key code of conduct governing relations between states and a diplomatic instrument for the promotion of peace and stability in the region”. “The High Council of the TAC shall be the important component in the ASEAN Security Community.”

Strengthening TAC regime –

- (i) Modify it: Create an ASEAN Court of Justice as a dispute settlement mechanism, and rely less upon the High Council, which is essentially a political instrument of limited relevance for issues such as territorial disputes.
  - (ii) Persuade U.S to accede to TAC. It is the only major power that has yet to do so.
6. Terrorism – assistance in capacity building, evolve greater understanding and consensus on root causes and counter strategies.
  7. Capacity building for ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance