

# Rhetoric vs. Reality

## *ASEAN's Clouded Future*

Nicholas Khoo

Last October, at the Ninth Summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Bali, the leaders of the organization formally declared their aim of establishing a security community in Southeast Asia by the year 2020. The declaration serves as a bold statement of the ASEAN members' attempts to rejuvenate an institution at once plagued by internal paralysis and subject to assault from the forces of Islamic radicalism. Hopes are high within ASEAN. As ASEAN Deputy Secretary-General Wilfrido Villacorta noted: "This security community...[will] strengthen national and regional capacity to counter terrorism, drug trafficking, trafficking in persons and transnational crime."<sup>1</sup> This is not mere rhetoric. In early March this year, the ASEAN foreign ministers met in Vietnam's scenic Halong Bay to make headway on initiatives to build a security community. One idea under serious consideration is the establishment of an ASEAN peacekeeping force. An increasing number of scholars and the organization itself argue that ASEAN should strive to realize the goal of forming a security community.<sup>2</sup>

While such events as the Halong Bay meeting represent a step forward for the organization, major questions remain. The ASEAN security community idea suffers from two signif

**Nicholas Khoo** is currently a Ph. D. Candidate at Columbia University. In 2002–2003, he was Visiting Scholar at the Foreign Affairs College in Beijing.

icant problems that will impede its realization. First, since the Asian financial crisis of 1997–98, Indonesia, the most powerful state in the region, has failed to stabilize its domestic political affairs. Unless Jakarta can put its house in order, it is unlikely that it can provide the leadership that is necessary to transform ASEAN into a security community. Second, there is an increasing divergence between ASEAN's declared principles encapsulated in "ASEAN Way" rhetoric, and the empirical reality that characterizes the organization. This credibility gap suggests that even if a security community emerges, its performance will leave much to be desired, and may even be counterproductive. This assessment indicates that rather than developing into a security community, ASEAN's future is likely to be that of a failing security organization.

### **The History of the Security Community Concept.**

The concept of security community now in vogue among Southeast Asian academics and bureaucratic elites is a modification of the pluralistic security community thesis minted by Karl Deutsch and his colleagues in 1957. Deutsch defined the term as a community where the likelihood of the use of force between members was almost unthinkable, and used Western Europe as an example.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the use of the pluralistic security community concept to characterize inter-Western European Relations was not without its problems. In particular, even if it did exist, the security community was arguably a direct consequence of American hegemony over Western Europe rather than a normal predilection against war. The literal presence of U.S. troops on Western European soil obviated conflict in Western Europe and bolstered

Washington's extended deterrence policy. In declaring Western Europe a pluralistic security community, these theorists mistook effect for cause. If the security community idea has problems on its "home turf" of Western Europe, its transposition to the region of Southeast Asia turns out to be an even more hazardous venture.

### **The Indonesian Question.**

The formation of ASEAN in 1967 was based on a quid pro quo between Indonesia and its ASEAN partners. The pre-1967 period had been a tumultuous one as the various states in Southeast Asia struggled to stabilize their domestic polities in the aftermath of decolonization. Previous attempts at regional organization—in the form of the Maphilindo confederation and the Association of Southeast Asia—had collapsed. Instability was exacerbated as Indonesia's relations vis-à-vis its immediate neighbor, the newly formed Malaysia, were defined in terms of President Sukarno's policy of *Konfrontasi* (1963–1966) whereby Jakarta opposed the establishment, at its doorstep, of what it declared was a "neo-colonialist state." The fall of Sukarno and the ascension to power of General Suharto provided the opportunity for a recalibration in Southeast Asia's international relations. In return for playing a constructive and stabilizing role, Indonesia was recognized as first among equals in the non-communist half of Southeast Asia. The returns for the other ASEAN states were significant. In particular, the resolution of the "Indonesian question" allowed them to focus on bolstering state capacity and autonomy at a time of external instability and internal subversion. Subsequently, the various ASEAN states embarked on a trail-blazing path of export-led econom-

ic growth. On the diplomatic and strategic fronts, the organization worked with the United States and China to reverse the Vietnamese annexation of Cambodia in the decade following 1979.

Successful political institutions require leaders. In many respects, Indonesia is the natural leader of the ASEAN security community: it is ASEAN's most populous state, with a population of approximately 215 million people; it is the world's largest Islamic country; and, during the three decade long Suharto era that ended in 1998, it had a relatively successful track record of leadership in both ASEAN and the Non-Aligned Movement. Indeed, Indonesian

last resort. In the second, it was the Australians that had to intervene to stabilize the situation in East Timor.

Indonesia has been more of a hindrance than a help on another crucial issue: the rise of radical Islam. Rather than facing the issue head on, Jakarta has procrastinated. The roots of this procrastination lie in the failure of, until recently, Indonesia's elite to confront strategic realities in the post-9/11 world. In a statement that exemplifies the extent of denial that previously existed in Indonesia, Jusuf Wanandi, Chairman of the Supervisory Board and Member of the Board of Directors of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in

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President Megawati proposed the ASEAN security community concept in her capacity as Chairman of the 9th ASEAN Summit in an effort designed to reassert Indonesia's leadership role within ASEAN.<sup>5</sup>

However, it is doubtful whether Jakarta can lead ASEAN into the promised land of a security community. Since 1997, Indonesia has become the source of much of the instability in Southeast Asia. In both the periods of the Asian financial crisis in 1997-98 and the referendum to determine East Timor's political status vis-à-vis Indonesia in 1999, Jakarta's mismanagement prolonged the effects of these crises and exacerbated regional turmoil, requiring non-ASEAN actors to intervene. In the first instance, the International Monetary Fund was a lender of

Jakarta, underplayed the rise of radical Islamist elements in the country. In an article published in mid-2002, just prior to the Bali bombings, he noted that "attention to such groups as the Laskar Jihad has been overblown. They are rather noisy groups, but small and marginal....Extremist groups (in Indonesia) protesting U.S. policies on global terrorism are small and temporary in nature."<sup>6</sup>

Such views appear to be limited not only to prominent policy-analysts at think tanks. A particularly bizarre incident involving Indonesian Vice President Hamzah Haz reflects the problem Indonesia (and by extension, ASEAN) faces in coming to terms with terrorism emanating from radical Islamic groups. In May 2002, in an attempt to evaluate the claims made by the U.S. government

and some fellow ASEAN members that Indonesia had a terrorist problem, Vice President Haz invited the leaders of a number of extremist Islamic organizations for a meal at his residence. Invitees included *Jemaah Islamiyah* leader Abu Bakar Baashir, *Laskar Jihad* leader Jafar Umar Talib, and Al-Habib Muhammed Rizieq bin Hussein Syihab, the leader of a group that threatened to forcibly expel Americans from Indonesia after the United States started bombing Afghanistan in 2001. After a four-hour dinner discussion, Haz declared that the experience had left him "certain that there are no terrorists in Indonesia" and that these individuals "only want to see that Indonesia has a religious society. None of them has an extreme character."<sup>7</sup>

Given the above statements, it is not surprising that rather than leading ASEAN in cracking down on the terrorist network in Southeast Asia, Indonesia has been the region's weakest link. Jakarta's reluctance to admit, until the Bali bombings of October 2002, that there was even a problem with "home-grown" terrorists based in Indonesia has meant that ASEAN's war on terrorism has been unnecessarily handicapped. This delay provided the region's principal terrorist group, *Jemaah Islamiyah*, with a valuable opportunity to re-group after the initial crackdown by Southeast Asian governments in the period immediately after 9/11.

Following the Bali and Jakarta bombings of 2002 and 2003, the Indonesian government has taken a more pro-active stance against radical Islamic terrorist groups. However, recent events appear to indicate that Jakarta is still ambivalent about the nature of the threat posed by radical Islam. Upon appeal, *Jemaah Islamiyah* leader Abu Bakar Bashir's

three-year prison sentence was reduced by the Indonesian Supreme Court. He is scheduled to be released on 30 April after serving half the term of the sentence. This despite the fact that Omar al-Faruq, an al Qaeda operative captured in Indonesia, has told the Central Intelligence Agency that Bashir was the major organizer of a plot to blow up the American, Australian and Israeli embassies in Singapore.<sup>8</sup> Prison time appears to only have solidified Bashir's convictions of the need to oppose the U.S. and its allies. In a recent interview with an Australian Television network from his prison cell, Bashir said that the recent bombings in Madrid were justified retribution for Spain's support of the US war on terror. Bashir claimed that "the bombings were caused by the (Spanish) government's support of America, and that was correct."<sup>9</sup>

**The ASEAN Way.** The growing divergence between the organization's declared principles and the empirical problems with which it is confronted, presents a second major problem for ASEAN. The ASEAN Declaration establishing the security community goal places an emphasis on principles associated with the "ASEAN Way" as a means of realizing a security community. The ASEAN Way is a nebulous concept that encapsulates the organization's ostensible *modus operandi* in which a preference for informality and consensus, non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, and an aversion to legalistic procedures are often cited. The origins of the ASEAN Way are often traced to practices that were developed after the organization's founding in 1967, and honed during its successful opposition to Vietnam's annexation of Cambodia from 1979 to the end of the Cold War. How-

ever, even during the supposed hey-day of ASEAN during the initial years following the end of the Cold War, the “ASEAN Way” has borne a tenuous connection with reality. Consensus has been difficult to establish, and issues have been kicked down the road for resolution at a later date, with adverse consequences for the organization. In practice, adherence to the principle of consensus has meant that intra-ASEAN disputes are swept under the rug rather than resolved.

A prominent example of the failure of the ASEAN Way has been the unsuccessful ASEAN attempt, led by Thailand, to pursue a “constructive engagement” policy toward the ruling State Peace and Development (SPDC) regime in Myanmar. The policy, which ASEAN adopted in 1992, failed in altering the military regime’s behavior and ended with the admission of Myanmar into ASEAN in 1997. The subsequent Thai-initiated policy of “flexible engagement” toward Myanmar has met a similar fate. Indeed, in the ensuing years following Myanmar’s admission, ASEAN’s engagement policy has been far from constructive in moder-

Aung San Suu Kyi under “protective custody” after it realized that support for the NLD has not diminished. The forced detention of Aung sparked worldwide condemnation and has led even some of the more pro-engagement SPDC segments within ASEAN to admit that its constructive engagement policy with Yangon has done nothing to end Myanmar’s political crisis. Subsequently, ASEAN as an organization has shown little compunction in violating its own ASEAN Way principles by intervening in the internal affairs of Myanmar. In July 2003, then Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir threatened Myanmar with the unprecedented step of expulsion if the regime continued to defy international opinion on the issue of Aung San Suu Kyi.<sup>10</sup> The lack of follow through on such statements presents a serious credibility issue for ASEAN.

At a minimum, if principles associated with the ASEAN Way really matter, we should see them working when it really counts—when states have disputes. However, it is increasingly difficult to find much to cheer about in intra-ASEAN

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ating the human rights abuses perpetrated by the SPDC. The organization has been on the defensive as Myanmar’s human rights record has lapsed, and the organization’s European and American dialogue partners continue to ostracize the military regime.

In early June 2003, the SPDC placed Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and National League for Democracy (NLD) leader

relations. In fact, since 2001 ASEAN members have increasingly ignored the ASEAN mechanisms for conflict resolution and looked to international institutions to settle bilateral disputes. The Malaysian and Indonesian quarrel over the Sipadan-Ligitan islands off the Malaysian province of Sabah was settled at the International Court of Justice in December 2002. In early August 2003,

former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir indicated that Kuala Lumpur will seek international arbitration in its increasingly acrimonious dispute with Singapore over the supply of water to the island republic. In early October 2003, Malaysia brought its dispute with Singapore over the latter's land reclamation activities to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. In mid-October, Singapore gave Malaysia notice that it too would seek international arbitration over railway land located in Singapore that remains under the ownership of Malaysia's national railway company. These examples serve to highlight the widening gap between the reality of the region's international relations and the ASEAN diplomatic community's discourse. Little wonder that the late South east Asian expert Michael Leifer noted that "the ASEAN Way has been a convenient rationalization for diplomatic torpor, formal or informal. The ASEAN Way, so-called, has been possible because it has never really been put to the test."<sup>11</sup>

**ASEAN as a Failing Security Institution.** If ASEAN is not a security community, then what is it? ASEAN's paralysis demonstrates that institutions can just as easily exacerbate tensions and block solutions to regional problems as they can facilitate cooperation. The first step required in any attempt to understand ASEAN is to recognize that an institution without a leader is rudderless, and that ASEAN's descent into paralysis has been caused largely by the absence of effective Indonesian leadership following the fall of President Suharto in 1998. Given this institutional leadership vacuum, ASEAN has locked its members in a vicious pattern of negative interaction that is corroding

ASEAN and will spell its continuing irrelevance, if not eventual demise.

The ASEAN states are caught in a dilemma. They are reluctant to abandon the organization since that would expose member states to increased vulnerability vis-à-vis external powers. Perhaps equally important, discarding ASEAN would re-open the question of Indonesia's role in the region. However, the cost of maintaining the status quo under ineffective Indonesian leadership is that ASEAN's constituent states are locked in a decaying organization whose *raison d'être* is continually challenged as it fails to respond effectively to regional events. This quandary is further compounded by the fact that no other ASEAN state is willing to take over Indonesia's leadership mantle. While Thailand might seem in theory to be a possible leader of the ASEAN security community, the practical reality is that even if Indonesia were to have to relinquish its mantle, it is not clear that either Bangkok or any other ASEAN state would want to take up that responsibility. Consider the situation surrounding the crisis in East Timor in 1999. Arguably the key reason that Australia had to lead the intervention force is precisely that other ASEAN states such as Thailand were unwilling to exercise leadership within ASEAN. The primary reason for the present state of affairs is simple to those who follow intra-ASEAN politics: the other states are unwilling to offend Jakarta.

Rather than viewing ASEAN as a nascent security community, it would be more appropriate to look at the organization as a failing security institution. The focus on ASEAN's economic success and failures in the pre-1997 and post-1997 periods, has obscured the fact that whatever other functions it performs, it is first

and foremost a security institution. Formed in 1967, during the heart of the Cold War, ASEAN was a bulwark against Asian communism. As one observer notes: "The ostensible purpose of establishing ASEAN was to promote economic, social, and cultural co-operation, but regional security was the prime occupation of its founders."<sup>12</sup> In the post-Cold War era, a concern for security issues has remained at the top of ASEAN's agenda. Via the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum, the organization has attempted to ensure its stability and security by keeping the US anchored in the Asia-Pacific as a means to hedge against a rising China, East Asia's traditional hegemon. Within this context, it should be noted that security organizations are in the business of producing security and should be assessed accordingly. Judged upon this criterion, ASEAN has failed to achieve its purpose during the post-Cold War era.<sup>13</sup> To take

## **No Way Out for the ASEAN Security Community?**

The attempt to transform ASEAN into a security community is a classic example of putting the proverbial cart before the horse. A security community is supposed to be the result of a convergence of strategic perspectives, bolstered by shared norms and economic interdependence. One indication that such a convergence of perspectives has not occurred can be seen in the fact that Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam have reportedly been cool to the idea of establishing an ASEAN peace keeping force, arguably the first concrete initiative to implement the security community concept.<sup>15</sup>

That a consolidated security community has arguably never existed, even with respect to the European Union, suggests grounds for skepticism concerning ASEAN's recent declaration. To use the rhetoric of a security community to

## **Discarding ASEAN** would re-open the question of Indonesia's role in the region.

the most recent example, despite extensive funding, ASEAN's security services were unaware of the scope of al Qaeda's operations in Southeast Asia and its close association with Jemaah Islamiyah and other radical Islamic groups in the region. The discovery soon after 9/11 that al Qaeda had established a regional network in Southeast Asia, was made even more alarming by revelations that indigenous terrorists have plans to establish an Islamic state encompassing Indonesia, Malaysia, parts of the Philippines and eventually Singapore and Brunei.<sup>14</sup>

attempt to achieve a convergence of strategic perspectives when none exists is an undertaking that is destined to fail. As things currently stand, it is unclear how seeking to transform ASEAN into a security community will increase the ASEAN states' individual and collective security.

Given ASEAN's declining legitimacy since 1997, the last thing the organization needs is another failed initiative. Rather than undertaking the construction of a security community, it would appear that with the spillover of terror

ism into Southeast Asia even before the Bali and Jakarta bombings in 2002 and 2003 respectively, that the ASEAN member states would be better served by focusing their undivided attention on the threat emanating from the forces of rad-

ical Islam. To be distracted from that task by attempting to engage in the construction of a security community would be a significant error which present and future generations of Southeast Asians and their policy-makers will rue.

## NOTES

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