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An Australian Perspective on the "Utility of Unity" in ASEAN

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The dynamics at work in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, are an under-appreciated, but crucial component of the geo-political equation of the Asia-Pacific region. This review of the factors at play from an Australian perspective, offers insights for policy makers reviewing the efficacy of President Obama's Rebalance to Asia.

With more than 600 million people, the ten nation ASEAN is a major trading partner for Australia, China, the United States, and beyond. ASEAN sits astride strategic and economic choke points of vital concern to countries that rely on free and unfettered access for their security and prosperity. As those concerns grow, the significance of ASEAN can be expected to grow as well.

Despite encompassing a wide range of differences in ethnicity, religion, political and economic systems, strategic orientation, languages, cultures, geography, and levels of wealth, ASEAN has become a remarkably significant, albeit fragile supra-national body. The "ASEAN Way" of avoiding contentious disagreements has facilitated the emergence of a number of forums that have helped shape the Asia-Pacific.

In a sense, as South Asian and East Asian powers rise, ASEAN is becoming the fulcrum for engagement on shared economic and security concerns, with a range of forums created in recent years to cater for the growing demand.

Critics would suggest many of these forums are nothing more than talk fests, but a wide range of international interlocutors, including Australia, persist with engagement, reckoning that to "jaw-jaw is better than to war-war".

Engaging in verbal "fights" at such talk forums may appear problematic. But the exchanges of views and the relationships formed can enhance mutual understanding, and in turn foster security and stability. In Australia's case, its security and economic prosperity is increasingly seen as being integrally linked with that of its immediate northern neighbors.

Those countries that engage with ASEAN witness incremental progress on a wide range of matters which at times has appeared almost glacial in pace. Relying on unanimity for decision making has helped avoid conflict between ASEAN's strikingly different and varied member states. Many have seen this as a strength in itself.

Yet today ASEAN is being buffeted in particular by the re-emergence of great power rivalry, with security challenges threatening to undermine the centrality of ASEAN and more.

Disputes over the South China Sea have revealed a fracture between ASEAN's maritime claimant states and its predominantly Theravada Buddhist mainland states. Other bilateral border disputes and internal security challenges also have demonstrated ASEAN's fragility, revealing how misunderstandings can quickly flare into confrontations.

China's economic growth has been accompanied by a surge in defense spending and interest in securing its territorial and maritime claims. By land reclamation on shallow reefs and the use of apparently non-lethal force, China has incrementally asserted its claims over the so-called nine-

John Blaxland, Senior Fellow at Australian National University's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, explains that "United States policy makers should consider the significance and utility of Australia's military commitment in the Middle East compared to its ability to help foster regional security and stability in Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific: it cannot readily do both well."

dash line that encompasses the overwhelming majority of the South China Sea. Individual claimant states have sought to rally ASEAN support but so far China has been effective at dividing to rule.

The Declaration on the Code of Conduct of 2002, for instance, was intended to lay a path towards a binding Code of Conduct to avoid escalatory and aggressive behavior involving military vessels at sea. But there is as yet no binding Code of Conduct between claimant states.

In the meantime, the US rebalance has been welcomed by countries seeking support for their claims in the face of relentless pressure. But the United States knows that most such claims remain legally contentious. The United States is understandably reluctant to take sides, so there is little prospect of the direct employment of US armed forces to resist China's endeavors over these contested claims. But other collective steps can be taken.

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ASEAN faces a precarious future unless member countries and regional partners exercise greater cohesion and integration. The national interests of member states would best be served by placing priority on ASEAN unity. Divided, ASEAN is of marginal consequence. But when acting together, ASEAN matters.

Friends of ASEAN recognize its inherent fragility, but also the enduring utility of ASEAN acting as a fulcrum around which to engage constructively to enhance security, stability and prosperity. Its institutional mechanisms, including its secretariat and its head, the secretary general, need to be better resourced and further empowered. Countries like Australia and the United States have no direct say in such matters but where welcomed they should help foster a stronger and more resilient ASEAN.

ASEAN matters enormously to Australia, and Australia's long-term engagement has paid dividends in the past, notably during the East Timor crisis in 1999, when Australia needed an ASEAN partner. With decades of investment in relationships, scholarship programs and military exercises, Australia could draw on a reservoir of goodwill from countries like Thailand and the Philippines.

Since then, however, Australia's engagement in the long war in the Middle East has taken much of the focus away from Southeast Asia. Exercises and scholarship programs have been retained, but few Australian military personnel have spent any length of time in the region or invested in learning a regional language. Australia's cachet in the region has dwindled.

Nonetheless, the Five Power Defence Arrangement, which links Australia, New Zealand and Britain to the defense of Malaysia and Singapore, has proven remarkably resilient. Yet for historical reasons (it was established in 1967, after the end of Sukarno's Confrontation) the FPDA excludes Australia's most important neighbor, Indonesia.

Australia's relations with Indonesia have been soured by a series of incidents related to beef, boats, spies, and clemency. That is, the sudden cessation of live cattle exports to Indonesia (since resumed), the stopping of boats laden with people seeking unregulated entry into Australia, the Snowden eavesdropping revelations, and the unwillingness of Indonesia to offer clemency to Australians on death row. A circuit breaker is needed.

In the national language of Indonesia, *manis* means sweet. Perhaps a regional security forum including Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia and Singapore (MANIS) could help sweeten regional security relations, facilitating closer and trusted interaction between these states on transnational security issues of common concern.

United States policy makers should consider the significance and utility of Australia's military commitment in the Middle East compared to its ability to help foster regional security and stability in Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific: it cannot readily do both well. Also, because Australian Governments tend to find it hard to say no to US appeals for military support, such appeals should be made sparingly and judiciously.

US defense and foreign policy is strong on Northeast Asia, but in recent years Southeast Asia has not featured prominently. In light of its fragility, its centrality and its geo-strategic significance, ASEAN should assume greater prominence in Washington's strategic calculus.

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