The ASEAN Security Community: A Misplaced Consensus

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Abstract

Is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) a security community? To many theorists and Southeast Asian specialists, the answer is a resounding yes. This article interrogates this consensus. The author contends that a greater sensitivity to empirical evidence and theoretical rigour leads to the conclusion that the claims of security community theorists are far less compelling than is claimed.

Keywords

ASEAN, security community theory, identity, norms

Introduction

At the Ninth Association of Southeast Asian Nations’ (ASEAN) Summit meeting in October 2003, the leaders of the organization formally declared their aim of establishing an ASEAN community, with the security dimension receiving pride of place (Declaration of ASEAN Concord, 2003). The aspiration to become a security community has strengthened with time. ASEAN has declared the year 2015 as the date by which it is to realize its security community vision (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009). Amid the flurry of activity, a basic question needs to be posed: Are interpretations of ASEAN as a security community convincing? Or, do they...
represent, to borrow from Alexander Woodside (1978, p. 228) a misplaced ‘fast food’ consensus, confusing, rather than enlightening? If one were to consult a good portion of the academic literature on this topic, the answer to the question posed is clear: with appropriate qualification for individual differences of opinion, ASEAN can be interpreted as a security community (Acharya, 1995, 2001, 2009, 2012; Bellamy, 2004; Collins, 2007; Dewi, 2003; Peou, 2005; Sopiece, 1986; Sukma, 2003), even if there is divergence on whether this is to be welcomed (or not) (Kuhonta, 2006, p. 339; Kupchan, 2012, p. 218; Burke & McDonald, 2007, p. 14), or if progress is anything more than marginal (Acharya, 2009, pp. 297–298; Emmerson, 2005, p. 181; Khong, 1997, p. 337, 2004, pp. 190–192). There are only a few dissenting voices to this view (Cotton, 2002; Ganesan, 2005; Jones & Smith, 2001, 2007; Jones, 2012, pp. 223–224; Khoo, 2004, 2014).

This article evaluates the near consensus that ASEAN can be satisfactorily interpreted with reference to the security community concept. Its central claim is that the concept illuminates neither intra-ASEAN relations nor ASEAN’s relations with China, its leading trading partner and major security concern. The argument will be laid out in the following stages. First, the concept is defined. Second, we interrogate the concepts of identity and norms that analysts claim have played a central role in the evolution of ASEAN as a security community. Next, we examine the empirical record for systematic evidence as to whether ASEAN is a security community. Finally, ASEAN has attempted to project its security community model of conflict resolution onto the wider East Asian region. We explore this effort via ASEAN’s interactions with China over the South China Sea issue.

Security Community Theory

In referring to ASEAN as a security community, ASEAN policymakers and scholars are drawing on a concept that was first introduced to the academic literature by Karl Deutsch and his colleagues in the 1950s, as a way to understand European integration (Deutsch et al., 1957). The concept found its way to the field of Southeast Asia’s international relations in the mid-1980s (Sopiece, 1986, p. 229). Formally defined,

a security community is considered as a group which has become integrated, where integration is defined as the attainment of a sense of community, accompanied by formal or informal institutions or practices, sufficiently strong and widespread to assure peaceful change among members of a group with ‘reasonable’ certainty over a ‘long’ period of time. (Deutsch, 1961, p. 98)

The relations between states in a security community are characterized by the absence of war and the absence of significant organized preparations for war, such as military contingency planning. Competitive military build-ups or arms races between members of the security community should also be absent (Deutsch, 1961, pp. 98–99).
Adler and Barnett have further developed the literature on security communities, offering a three-tiered framework and model for explaining their development (Adler & Barnett, 1998, pp. 29–65). In the first tier, precipitating conditions are identified. These include: changes in technology, and the development of new interpretations of social reality and external threats (Adler & Barnett, 1998, pp. 37–39). In the second tier, states and their people engage in social interactions that transform the environment in which they are embedded. Factors conducive to the development of mutual trust and collective identity are identified. These include: favourable developments in ‘structural’ categories of power and knowledge, and ‘process’ categories of transactions, international organizations and institutions, and social learning (Adler & Barnett, 1998, pp. 39–45). In the third tier, necessary conditions for dependable expectations of peaceful change are required. These include the development of a reciprocal process of mutual trust and collective identity (Adler & Barnett, 1998, pp. 45–48). Discernable stages are identified in the development of security communities. This starts off as a nascent phase, develops into an ascendant phase, finally becoming mature (Adler & Barnett, 1998, pp. 45–55). Security communities vary in how robust they are. On an ideal-type continuum, they can range from being ‘loosely-coupled’ to ‘tightly-coupled’ (Adler & Barnett, 1998, p. 30).

Bellamy has sought to extend the scope of security community theory, examining the relationship between states in a security community and those outside it (Bellamy, 2004, pp. 10–11). He contends that there are three possible outcomes (Bellamy, 2004, p. 11). First, the relationships between a security community and states outside can become ‘more rigid than those that existed before the states involved identified themselves as “insiders” and “outsiders” of a security community’ (Bellamy, 2004, p. 11). This would be consistent with what Bellamy identifies as a ‘realist logic’ (Bellamy, 2004, p. 178). Second, relations between the ‘insider’ and the ‘outsider’ can remain ‘qualitatively unchanged’, a condition described as an ‘ambivalent community’ (Bellamy, 2004, p. 11). Finally, the option of an ‘integrationist community’ is considered. Here, the ‘boundaries between insiders and outsiders become softer’, as the sense of community within the security community is projected onto the external actors (Bellamy, 2004, p. 11). This process may lead to an enlargement of the security community (or not) or the creation of an overlapping layer of tightly and loosely coupled security communities. Bellamy’s principal finding is that ASEAN is a ‘loosely-coupled security community’ (Bellamy, 2004, p. 88). In respect to ASEAN’s relations with China, in this view, the ASEAN case ‘suggests that the stronger a security community becomes, the less likely it is to reproduce realist security practices and discourses’ (Bellamy, 2004, p. 181).

**Concepts: Norms and Identity**

In making the claim that a security community is emerging in Southeast Asia, proponents typically focus attention on the concepts of identity and/or norms (Acharya, 2001, pp. 24–30; Bellamy, 2004, pp. 21–24, 97; Khong, 1997, p. 321).
These are central concepts in the constructivist approach to understanding political behaviour. Norms are understood as ‘standards of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity’ (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Norms have both regulative and constitutive effects on state behaviour. According to Kratochwil, the chief functions of norms are to prescribe and proscribe behaviour (Kratochwil, 1989, p. 59). Once established, norms have a life of their own, redefining state interests and creating collective identities. Identity, which is an ‘inter-subjective notion’, is associated with the ‘we-feeling’ that ASEAN states are claimed to possess (Acharya, 2001, pp. 26–30; Khong, 1997, p. 321). Collective identity is constructed through interaction and socialization. We are told that ‘like norms, collective identifications are made and remade through interactions and socialization’ (Acharya, 2001, p. 27).

Identity Crisis: Measuring Identity, Anarchy and Aggregation

In evaluating the claims of analysts who utilize the concept of identity, a basic issue arises. How do we measure an entity’s identity? There is no consensus. As it stands, a virtual free-for-all exists, with different analysts using different definitions of the concept (Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston & McDermott, 2006). Since Acharya has provided the most influential case for viewing ASEAN as a security community, we will focus heavily on his analysis, discussing other works where relevant (Acharya, 1995, 1998, 2001, 2009).

Acharya acknowledges the measurement problem and proposes three methods for measuring identity (Acharya, 2001, p. 28). The first is a commitment to multilateralism. The second is the development of security cooperation. However, these are arguably excellent measures not of identity, but of changing threat perceptions. For example, there is no need for any identity change in order for states to engage in multilateral security cooperation against a real or perceived threat. Indeed, that is the very essence of Stephen Walt’s realist classic, The Origins of Alliances (Walt, 1986). In this view, the development of ASEAN security cooperation during and after the Cold War is best explained as a reaction to threats, rather than the development of any nascent sense of an ASEAN identity.

ASEAN security cooperation during the Cold War was a reaction to the tangible threat posed by the Vietnamese communists (Lifer, 1989). The subsequent incorporation of Vietnam into ASEAN in the post-Cold War era had little to do with identity change on the part of Hanoi. Instead, it is a reflection of the fact that the Vietnamese were unsuccessful in a contest with China for strategic dominance over Indochina (Khoo, 2011). Also, the origins of post-Cold War ASEAN cooperation, epitomized in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), reflect a typically realist concern with influencing the regional balance of power in ASEAN’s favour (Lifer, 1996). The ARF was formed in the early 1990s as part of a hedging-balancing strategy by ASEAN vis-à-vis a rising China, and as a prudent means of keeping the US engaged in Asia. That the ARF has floundered in recent years is again, as described below, a function of power politics.
Acharya’s third measure of identity is derived from ‘the definition of what constitutes a region and commonly held notions about who is included and who is excluded’ (Acharya, 2001, p. 29). As far as this measure is concerned, it is elastic and amounts to saying that identity is really only what the actors constituting a region say it is. It should also be noted that this presumes that a consensus exists on the definition of a region, which is problematic (Emmerson, 1984). This leaves unanswered the question of how to deal with contending claims on how to define any region, and Southeast Asia in particular.

Identity and Anarchy

Second, there is the wider issue of the theoretical underpinnings of the security community theory itself. Security community theory has an affinity with constructivist theory, with its emphasis on cooperation, and transcending the relative pessimism of realism’s analysis of world politics. Significantly, all the security community theorists reviewed here either are constructivists or otherwise embrace a non-realist perspective. However, constructivist claims about the conflict-muting role of identity in anarchy are weak. Jonathan Mercer convincingly argues that even if we accept constructivist claims about the need to consider the issue of state identity in anarchy, it remains the case that we cannot avoid the reality of a neo-realist self-help world (Mercer, 1995, p. 247).

The logic of Mercer’s argument is that between groups, ‘competition results from categorization, comparison, and need for a positive social identity’ (Mercer, 1995, p. 246). Even if a state tries to empathize with another state, psychological research suggests strongly that ‘perspective taking between strangers is likely to be little more than ethnocentric projection. With the hope of empathy dashed, the prospects of other help are dim’ (Mercer, 1995, p. 249). Thus, while states can still choose to cooperate or engage in conflict, the decks are stacked against attempts to transcend a self-help system, as security community theorists attempt to do (Mercer, 1995, p. 251). Mercer’s analysis thus generates an alternative social psychological pathway to a realist result. Attempts by constructivists to critique Mercer have not been particularly convincing, overemphasizing individual agency and under-emphasizing the impact of structural forces.

Aggregating Identity

A third challenge associated with identity-based arguments concerns the issue of aggregation. Even if we accept for the sake of argument that identity matters, there is little indication from ASEAN security community advocates on how exactly identity change in individual states comes to transform ASEAN’s collective identity (Acharya, 2001; Khong, 1997, p. 321). How does a heterogeneous organization like ASEAN, whose members differ on a multitude of dimensions, come to develop a common identity? What happens if the identity of some states changes, while that of others does not? Does identity change in some states matter...
more than others? For example, it is plausible that identity change in more ‘powerful’ states within ASEAN like Indonesia matters more than identity change in Laos or Cambodia. Yet, given the absence of a reliable method of measuring identity change, analysts of Southeast Asia’s international relations should be very cautious about embracing claims that have been advanced for such an interpretation of ASEAN.

**The Origins of Norms: An Elusive Search**

In the burgeoning literature on norms in Southeast Asia’s international relations, of which that on the ASEAN security community is an excellent example, insufficient attention has been paid to the question of why certain norms emerged, while others fell by the wayside. The foregoing point is particularly critical for norm-based analysis. As Jeffrey Legro points out, analysts ‘confront not a dearth, but a diffusion of norms in the international arena. Given this availability, one can almost always identify a norm to “explain” or “allow” a particular effect’ (Legro, 1997, p. 33). Since different norms can have competing or even contradictory impulses, it is important to offer a persuasive explanation for the origins and consolidation of ASEAN’s key norms.

Acharya argues that a number of norms have led to the emergence of a nascent security community in Southeast Asia including non-interference, non-use of force, the pursuit of regional autonomy, the avoidance of collective defence, and in particular, the practice of the ASEAN Way (Acharya, 2001, pp. 47–79, 195). It is further argued that ASEAN’s norms derive from two sources. The first source is a variety of official documents, the most important being the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation signed in Bali at the First ASEAN Summit in 1976. The second source comes from ‘the local social, cultural and political milieu’ (Acharya, 2001, p. 47). It is noted that since the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation codifies principles that are present in various international documents, there is nothing particularly unique about them. The second source of ASEAN’s norms therefore assumes particular significance in the analysis. Acharya contends that ‘what made ASEAN really distinctive were the norms which came to be known as the ASEAN Way’ (Acharya, 2001, p. 63). Users of the ‘ASEAN Way’ term emphasize two key aspects: a preference for informality and an aversion to the institutionalization of cooperation (Acharya, 1997, 2001; Almonte, 1997/1998; Katsumata, 2003).

Unfortunately, the centrality of ‘ASEAN Way’ norms is matched only by elusiveness concerning their origins. Acharya either rejects or is ambivalent about common explanations for the origins of the ASEAN Way, such as cultural similarities among ASEAN societies and the role of interpersonal ties among the first generation of ASEAN leaders (Acharya, 2001, p. 64). However, no alternative or competing explanation is offered by the author in either versions of *Constructing a Security Community* (Acharya, 2001, 2009). Notwithstanding the importance of this issue, a mere two pages are accorded to it (Acharya, 2001, pp. 63–64, 2009, pp. 78–79). Without providing a satisfactory explanation, the narrative quickly moves on.
The Empirical Record: Security Community or Community in Need of Security?

The theoretical problems highlighted above are compounded by lack of empirical evidence. The Southeast Asian states do not meet the requirements for a security community for at least two empirical reasons. These include: (a) the reality of states preparing for, and actually using force against fellow ASEAN members, and (b) the dynamics of intra-ASEAN relations, with strong and repeated evidence of intervention in the internal affairs of other ASEAN states. First, evidence that ASEAN states have highly sophisticated, organized preparations for war directed against their ASEAN neighbours, such as military contingency planning, prima facie demonstrates that ASEAN is not a security community. Take, for example, the relationship between two founding members of ASEAN, Singapore and Malaysia. According to Tim Huxley, the Singaporean Armed Forces’ (SAF) ‘order of battle appears to be designed for the possibility of war with Malaysia’, aiming to ‘disable’ the Malaysians in ‘a brutal and fearless pre-emptive strike’ (Huxley, 1991, p. 204). This is a deterrence-based security relationship, simultaneously ‘characterized by considerable tension and mutual distrust’ (Huxley, 2000, p. 45). It does not resemble anything which could form a meaningful component of a security community. Indeed, discussions by this author with senior SAF personnel as recently as in late 2010 suggest that Huxley’s findings remain valid.

More recent events suggest that military force may have a brighter future in ASEAN than security community advocates have led us to believe. A cursory discussion of Thailand’s interactions with Cambodia and Myanmar suggests that use of the concept to characterize these relationships only brings it into disrepute. In 2001, a clash on the Thai–Myanmar border left dozens of Myanmar’s Tatmadaw troops dead (Haacke, 2005, p. 8). In early 2003, Thai–Cambodian bilateral tensions deteriorated to the point that Cambodian demonstrators razed the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh. Since 2008, both sides have repeatedly resorted to outright military force over the disputed eleventh-century Preah Vihear Temple site on the Thai–Cambodia border (International Crisis Group, 2011, pp. 16–19). Thus, even Rizal Sukma, an ASEAN security community advocate, has observed: ‘The Thai-Cambodia border dispute shows that members of ASEAN can’t refrain from using force with each other. How can you say they we are a community if we attack each other?’ (Jakarta Post, 2011). If the Thai–Cambodian conflict teaches us anything, it is that nationalism is alive and well in Southeast Asia (Chachavalpongpun, 2012). Therefore, looking to the future, it should not be surprising if progress in regional integration may eventually be subject to reversal as internecine forces trump grand elitist visions of regional integration.

Second, let us investigate the dynamics of intra-ASEAN relations. If ASEAN really is a developing security community, we would expect member states to be engaging in practices and integrative processes that are systematically moving it in that direction. We would not expect significant intervention in the internal affairs of other ASEAN member states. It is therefore revealing to hear a high-level official from an ASEAN state declare that ‘frankly, we have been interfering
mercilessly in each other’s internal affairs for ages, from the very beginning’ (Jones, 2012, p. 1). A review of two examples suggests that interventionist proclivities have been, and remain, a powerful force in intra-ASEAN relations (Jones, 2012; Khoo, 2004).

Analysis of the relationship between Malaysia and Singapore, two of the five original members of ASEAN, suggests that the mechanisms identified by Deutsch are weak, even after more than four decades (Deutsch, 1961, pp. 99–101). A lack of trust appears to be a defining element in the relationship (Huxley, 2000, pp. 44–50; Tan, 2000, pp. 8–25; Weatherbee, 2005, pp. 37, 124–126, 132–133). Both states have commented freely on the other’s internal affairs since Malaysia expelled Singapore from the Malaysian Federation in 1965. As a consequence of this act, Singapore’s survival as a state was in grave doubt. The Vietnam War had just started, and the communist threat—both domestic and regionally—was still a real one in Southeast Asia. Moreover, this development occurred just prior to the real take-off in export-led growth by the newly industrialized Asian states, a category which Singapore falls under (Haggard, 1990). This history has coloured the relationship.

In late 1986, the visit of Israeli President Chaim Herzog to Singapore provoked the ire of Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir, who claimed the visit offended regional Islamic sensibilities. Indonesian President Suharto was sufficiently alarmed at the deterioration of Malaysian–Singaporean relations to encourage both parties to de-escalate the situation. Further outrage quickly followed from 1989 to 1994. This involved an extended dispute over ownership of Pedra Branca (Pulau Batu Puteh), a small island positioned in the strategic location where the Singapore Strait meets the South China Sea (Tan, 2014, pp. 123–124; Weatherbee, 2005, pp. 132–133). A naval confrontation occurred between the two sides’ navies in 1989. Singapore claimed that Malaysian incursions into its waters continued regularly until 1994. In March 1997, diplomatic ties were severed when former Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew made derogatory remarks about the neighbouring Malaysian city of Johor Bahru. Worse was to follow in the aftermath of the Asian economic crisis of 1997–1998, as bilateral ties dissolved into mutual recrimination. Malaysia criticized Singaporean banks for aiding capital flight from the country. Malaysia even threatened to terminate treaties guaranteeing Singapore’s water supply and airspace access. In 2002, the Pedra Branca issue flared up again, forming the central component in a nationalistic Malaysian campaign against Singapore (Weatherbee, 2005, p. 132). As Weatherbee notes, the timing of the flare-up was not a coincidence, forming part of Malaysia’s strategy in water negotiations between the two states (Weatherbee, 2005, p. 133). Singapore responded to these provocations in robust terms. Fearing for its water supply in the event of a future crisis, the Singaporean leadership successfully worked to develop its own long-term water security strategy, which now includes state-of-the-art water recycling technology. The foregoing quick summary indicates mutual distrust rather than a proclivity toward security community integration. This is ultimately reflected in Singapore’s long-standing defence posture (discussed earlier), predicated as it is on a prevention strategy that would make George W. Bush envious.
The selection of the Malaysia–Singapore case may raise the objection that given the history of this particular relationship, one is ‘stacking the deck’ against the security community thesis. Yet, as social science methodology suggests, hard cases are an ideal way to test and validate claims (Van Evera, 1997, pp. 30–34). Nor is the Malaysia–Singapore relationship atypical. Regional relations in Southeast Asia have been regularly disturbed by a litany of bitter diplomatic spats that suggest that trust is not a systematic value in bilateral relations. To be specific, there has been regular intervention, both rhetorical and real, by ASEAN states in their neighbours’ internal affairs, causing trust to be in short supply. For example, ASEAN applied its non-interference norm somewhat haphazardly in its dealings with the egregious military regime in Myanmar, before it embarked on a process of reform after 2011.

Initially, ASEAN advanced the non-interference norm when it admitted Myanmar into the organization in 1997, against international opposition. Later, in 2003, then Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir violated this norm by declaring that the military junta’s continued repression of the democratically elected opposition, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, damaged ASEAN’s standing. Mahathir intimated that Myanmar might face expulsion from the Association. Mahathir cited ASEAN’s credibility as a rationale for threatening to expel Myanmar from ASEAN. He stated: ‘We are thinking about ourselves as ASEAN, we are not criticizing Myanmar for doing what is not related to us, but what they have done has affected our credibility. Because of that, we have voiced our views’ (Baker, 2003). Indeed, if the Myanmar government of the time, the euphemistically named State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), took at face value ASEAN’s commitment to the non-interference norm, they would have been seriously misled.

A critic of the argument advanced above may respond by saying that it is more than a decade since these examples of intervention in the internal affairs of other states have occurred. That is certainly not the case, given the recent Thai–Cambodian problems highlighted earlier, which also fall in this category of analysis. Moreover, Andrew Tan has identified a series of further examples of mutual intervention in internal affairs in Indonesian–Malaysian relations during 2007–2009. These episodes and the subsequent escalation of tensions cast severe doubts on ASEAN’s claim to be a security community (Tan, 2014, pp. 121–122).

It is also misleading to interpret the current lull in Singaporean–Malaysian tensions as evidence of a resolution of underlying issues because of a transformation in relations. Thus, it remains the contention of this author that no significant (as opposed to superficial) progress has been made in advancing ASEAN’s development in becoming a security community in the post-2003 time period.

Certainly, the endless ASEAN summits and meetings cannot seriously be taken as evidence that ASEAN is a security community, other than in the most trivial sense. Indeed, ASEAN advocates have not been able to produce compelling evidence. On this score, it is revealing that the best-researched constructivist account of ASEAN in the last 5 years is very circumspect in endorsing ASEAN as a security community. Thus, Alice Ba states that ‘whether or not ASEAN is a security community, Southeast Asia is today more stable, cooperative, and coherent than it was four decades ago’ (Ba, 2009, p. 19). Many historians and non-constructivist
analysts of Southeast Asia would agree with this perspective, and simply state that this stability is more tenuous than claimed, particularly given the narrative below.

Dealing with the Dragon: The ASEAN Security Community Meets Rising Chinese Power

Given the foregoing problems in conceptualizing ASEAN as a security community, one might have thought that circumspection would be in order. Instead, ASEAN and its security community advocates have sought to project the organization’s norms of conflict resolution and identity convergence practices onto a wider regional canvass. As laid out in the narrative below, ASEAN has assumed the self-appointed task of socializing China to behave as a responsible regional power, even over competing claims to the waters and territories in the South China Sea (Ba, 2006, 2009). On this critical issue in Sino-ASEAN relations, the optimistic expectations of security community advocates have not been borne out by evidence (Acharya, 2012b, p. 208; Bellamy, 2004, pp. 101–106).

A Brief History

The People’s Republic of China has a long-standing claim to the territories in the South China Sea, dating back to 1951 (Fravel, 2011; Valencia, 1995). Over time, a variety of actors ranging from Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam have maintained counterclaims to China’s, adding to the intractability of the issue. Military force has been used by China on a number of occasions, most notably against South Vietnam in 1974 and against a unified Vietnam in 1988 (Guo, 1992). In the post-Cold War era, the issue has taken on a new twist as China has become a net importer of petroleum in 1993, emerging as the world’s second largest importer in 2009 (behind the US). The possibility of untapped oil in the seabed of the South China Sea has raised the stakes, even if the fundamental drivers of state behaviour are classic sphere of influence considerations. The period from late 1994 to 1995 saw China occupying the contested Mischief Reef area, building structures in an area claimed by the Philippines.

ASEAN to the Rescue?

Against this backdrop, ASEAN has sought to deal with the issue via multilateral dialogue and socialization practices (Ba, 2006). For a while, the much-celebrated ASEAN Way appeared to have succeeded, if not in completely resolving the issue, then at least in taking the sting out of it. In 1996, China ratified the United Nations’ Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), but opted out of its dispute settlement mechanism (International Crisis Group, 2012, pp. 31–32). In 2002, ASEAN and China agreed to a Declaration of a Code of Conduct to address
the conflicting claims in the South China Sea. More than a decade after the Declaration, ASEAN and China have made no meaningful progress to resolve their competing claims. More precisely, relations have deteriorated. An attempt in 2008 by China, the Philippines and Vietnam to conduct a joint seismic survey of disputed areas in the South China Sea collapsed. In May 2009, Malaysia and Vietnam made a joint submission to a UNCLOS tribunal on their territorial claims. In response, China countered with a submission of a map to that same body which appeared to assert Chinese sovereignty over most of the South China Sea, including not only land features but also the surrounding waters.

That was only the start of a tumultuous period in the international politics of the South China Sea disputes. At the July 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum meetings in Hanoi, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi had a heated confrontation over the South China Sea issue (Bader, 2012, p. 105). The Vietnamese Government subsequently used its chairmanship of the ASEAN Defence Minister’s Meeting (ADMM) in Hanoi in mid-October 2010 to place that issue on the agenda for discussion. This was a direct challenge to China, which has consistently refused a multilateral approach, insisting instead on settling claims bilaterally. Beijing responded in the first week of November 2010, staging a major naval exercise in the South China Sea involving 1,800 troops, and more than 100 ships, submarines and aircrafts. At the end of December, Beijing announced plans to increase both its naval surveillance fleet and the number of maritime patrols in the South China and East China Seas. More was to come. In March 2011, two China marine surveillance ships aggressively approached a Filipino vessel conducting a seismic survey in the natural gas-rich Reed Bank. Manila claimed that four similar skirmishes occurred between April and May, and subsequently began referring to the South China Sea as the ‘West Philippine Sea’.

In a belated attempt to reverse this confrontational trend, in July 2011, ASEAN and China agreed on a set of guidelines for implementing the 2002 Declaration of a Code. In August, President Hu Jintao stated after meeting with his Filipino counterpart that ‘the countries concerned may put aside disputes and actively explore forms of common development in the relevant sea areas’ (International Crisis Group, 2012, p. 36). On 6 September, the Chinese government released a White Paper that suggested further moderation in its approach to disputed waters. The document reaffirmed Deng Xiaoping’s well-known guidance on ‘setting aside disputes to pursue joint development’ (International Crisis Group, 2012, p. 35). In January 2012, a Sino-ASEAN meeting led to the establishment of four working groups to explore marine environmental cooperation, marine scientific research, search and rescue operations and ways to combat transnational crime.

**Deterioration and Institutional Failure**

Subsequent developments reversed this positive momentum. In April–June 2012, a stand-off occurred between Chinese and Filipino naval vessels over the Scarborough Shoal in the Spratly Islands. In June, Vietnam passed a maritime law
declaring sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands. China protested this development, and unilaterally established a municipality called Sansha (three sandbanks in Chinese) in the South China Sea, with Yongxing (or Woody) island serving as the administrative hub. According to China’s official Xinhua news agency, Sansha’s jurisdiction extends over 13 sq. km of land and 2 million sq. km of surrounding water, effectively establishing control over much of the South China Sea (Olsen, 2012). In a direct challenge to Vietnam, China invited foreign bids for oil exploration inside Hanoi’s exclusive economic zone. China also out-maneuvered the Philippines over the Scarborough Shoal dispute. In June 2012, with a typhoon approaching, both sides agreed to withdraw from the area. However, the Chinese quickly returned to occupy the Shoal, claiming ownership without firing a shot.

ASEAN’s June 2012 Summit, held in Phnom Penh, spectacularly exposed the organization’s limitations as a multilateral institution dedicated to socializing China. For the first time in its 45-year history, the Association failed to agree on a post-summit communiqué. This was because Cambodia, China’s proxy and chair of the meeting, refused to include a reference to the South China Sea disputes in the final communiqué. One Filipino official claimed that Cambodia had used its position to exercise a de facto veto over the proceedings (Ghosh, 2012). Singaporean Foreign Minister Kasiviswanathan Shanmugam went further. Reflecting on the damage inflicted on ASEAN’s credibility, he observed that ‘to put it bluntly, it is a severe dent on ASEAN’s credibility’ (Today, 2012).

At the November East Asian Summit, also held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia and China again tried to neutralize debate over the South China Sea dispute. Cambodia, the summit chair, unilaterally announced that ASEAN had agreed with China that ‘they would not internationalize the South China Sea’, and would focus instead on ‘the existing ASEAN-China mechanisms’ (Ghosh, 2012). Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao clarified China’s position at a closed-door summit session, asserting that the islands in the South China Sea were China’s and ‘there is no question over…sovereignty’ (Qin, 2012). In response, Filipino President Aquino repudiated both his Cambodian hosts and China. Somewhat ominously for the continued practice of the ‘ASEAN Way’, he observed ‘that the ASEAN route is not the only route for us. As a sovereign state it is our right to defend our national interests’ (Bland, 2012).

Response to China: Philippines, Vietnam and the US

In the wake of the summit, Beijing announced that all new Chinese passports would include a map outlining China’s maritime claims. Rather than be cowed, the Philippines ratcheted up its opposition to Chinese policy in ways designed to intensify bilateral conflict, and to draw in external actors to balance China. In January 2013, Foreign Minister Albert Rosario informed Chinese Ambassador Ma Keqing that Manila would take the conflict to UNCLOS for resolution. Also, fully aware of developing Sino-Japanese tensions, Rosario called for an increased Japanese presence in the region. He stated that ‘we are looking for balancing factors…and Japan could be a significant balancing factor’ (Landing, Pilling & Soble, 2012).
Significantly, the Aquino government also moved to deepen the once estranged US–Philippines military relationship. Manila and Washington began negotiations in July 2013 on the establishment of a rotational air and naval agreement that allows for an increased US military presence (Bradsher, 2013). Subsequently, in early September, the Philippines’ military provided evidence of China building additional structures in the Scarborough Shoal, in violation of the 2002 Declaration.

It has become increasingly difficult for the Obama administration to ignore Beijing’s willingness to defend what both actors consider to be their legitimate sphere of maritime influence. A 5 December 2013 incident where a Chinese ship cut across the bow of an American cruiser, the USS Cowpens, drew the attention of the Obama administration (Perlez, 2013). In December 2013, Secretary of State Kerry made high-profile stopovers in Hanoi and Manila, announcing increases in US military aid to both. With Washington’s support, on 30 March 2014, Manila formally submitted a 4,000-page dossier to a UNCLOS tribunal called the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague, contesting China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea. This happened just before a 22–29 April visit to the region by President Obama, which included the signing of a 10-year US–Philippines defence cooperation agreement referred to above. The Philippines subsequently accused the Chinese of reclaiming the land around the contested Johnson Reef, the suspicion being that China might be intending to build an aircraft runway. These concerns were later confirmed (Cloud, 28 January 2015).

There were few doubts about Chinese activities in other areas of the South China Sea. Another front opened as tensions spiked in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. In May, the Chinese state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) towed in a giant 40-storey tall drilling rig to a potential drilling site in the Paracel Islands. These Islands are claimed by Vietnam, but occupied by China. The rig was accompanied by a Chinese convoy. It is unclear which side started the ramming, but both sides’ ships were subject to assault (Barboza & Mullany, 2014). In reaction to the perceived Chinese aggression, protests were recorded in 22 of Vietnam’s 63 provinces (Buckley & Chau, 2014). Vietnamese anger spilled over in the form of physical attacks on Chinese workers engaged in projects in Vietnam. Unconfirmed reports suggest that four persons (at least one of whom was Chinese) were killed and 135 wounded (Buckley & Chau, 2014). More than 3,000 Chinese workers were evacuated to China by the Chinese embassy in Hanoi and its consulate in Ho Chi Minh City.

These events were severe enough to elicit comment from ASEAN. On 10 May, at the 2014 ASEAN Summit, the ASEAN foreign ministers issued a statement expressing their ‘serious concerns over the ongoing developments in the South China Sea, which have increased tensions in the area’ (ASEAN foreign ministers, 2014). As tensions escalated, the ASEAN Secretary General Le Luong Minh went further in emphasizing that ‘we have to get China out of the territorial waters’ of Vietnam (Page, 2014). After a week of riot-based disruption, operations at the various industrial parks were gradually restored by the Vietnamese authorities. Verbal missives by both governments carried on into June, when the Chinese eventually announced the departure of the rig from the area (Denyer, 2014).
Recent Developments

In the last two months of 2014, the international politics of the South China Sea has been characterized by a mix of developments. In a widely publicized speech delivered in China, Chinese president and party leader Xi Jinping appeared to indicate an emphasis on cooperation in its East Asian policy (Reuters, 2014). Also, in an opinion piece in the Jakarta Post, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang mooted an idea to make 2015 ‘the year of China-ASEAN maritime Cooperation’ (Li, 2014). Indeed, at their meeting on the sidelines of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Beijing in November 2014, Filipino President Aquino claimed to have had a ‘meeting of minds’ with his Chinese counterpart President Xi (Kang-Lim, 2014). Also at the APEC meeting, Xi met his Vietnamese counterpart, Nguyen Van Dung, and similar sentiments were expressed then.

Balanced against these positive developments are contrary trends which strongly suggest that interstate competition is alive and well. Manila’s diplomacy is now increasingly robust, with the US playing a supporting role. Following Manila’s March 2014 UNCLOS submission to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague (referred to above), a 15-December 2014 cut-off date was set for the consideration of competing territorial claims in the South China Sea (Mabasa, 2014). A flurry of activity occurred ahead of that date. On 5 December, even as Manila announced a spike in Chinese building activity in the Scarborough Shoal, the US State Department released a paper challenging Chinese claims in the South China Sea (Dancel, 2014; US State Department, 2014). Meanwhile, on 7 December, China released a position paper contesting the Philippines’ claims (China Daily, 2014). This was backed up by a declaration of intent from China’s State Oceanic Administration to bolster China’s surveillance capacity in the South China Sea (Straits Times, 2014b). On 11 December, Vietnam submitted its own position paper to the Hague. Hanoi expressed support for Manila’s position, questioned China’s claims and asked the tribunal to consider Vietnam’s interests in contending disputes in the matter under consideration (Heydarian, 2014).

China, the South China Sea and Implications for the ASEAN Security Community

ASEAN’s relations with states outside the ASEAN security community, and in particular China, are not illuminated by the security community concept. ASEAN has not succeeded in socializing China in its alleged norms or ideational practices. Moreover, there is little record of norm-based mutual ‘restraint’ (Bellamy, 2004, pp. 116–117). China has increasingly demonstrated a lack of restraint in establishing an expanding maritime sphere of influence in the South China Sea. In acting as they have, the Chinese themselves perceive a lack of restraint by ASEAN actors, in particular, the Philippines and Vietnam (Cao & Ju, 2012; Qu, 2013).

ASEAN has accomplished little other than serve as a venue where either declarations are passed to little effect or high-profile spats occur involving China.
Once the meetings end and the real international politics begins, an alarming and unimpressive record has been recorded on an issue that is critical to its members’ security. The Philippines and Vietnam have found themselves in repeated confrontations with China. One member, Cambodia, is implicated in assisting China in trying to split the organization. Still others, like Brunei and Malaysia, have contesting territorial claims with China over the South China Sea, but have chosen to keep a low profile rather than confront the issue squarely. Others, such as, Singapore and Indonesia, do not have actual territorial conflict with China, and look at this picture with deep concern. Still others, like Thailand and Myanmar are too preoccupied with internal unrest. In effect, ASEAN’s policy on China is its inability to construct a coherent policy. Therefore, Michael Leifer, the late scholar of Southeast Asia, is surely right when he notes that ‘neither ASEAN nor (its ancillary) the Asean Regional Forum is a vehicle for solving regional problems’ (Leifer, 2000, p. 117).

Conclusion

It is nearly half a century since ASEAN’s founding in 1967. Surely, by now, a clear answer can be reached on the question of whether or not ASEAN is a security community. The analysis in this article supports a finding that whatever ASEAN may be, it is not a security community. It is therefore not surprising that efforts to extend ASEAN’s mechanisms to deal with wider regional issues, reflected in the recent history of Sino-ASEAN interactions on the South China Sea, have failed.

That said, after reading this analysis, some readers may grant its arguments, but still ask: Does it really matter that a misplaced consensus exists on whether ASEAN is a security community? Relatedly, what harm can be done in embracing this myth? The answer is: yes it matters, and rather a lot of harm can come about. The rise of China is one of the defining phenomena of the twenty-first century. It needs to be dealt with head-on and astutely. Instead, the fixation with building the ASEAN security community has become a serious source of distraction from this complex challenge.

It is appropriate to briefly pause and reflect on the intellectual basis of this distraction. The results are illuminating, if not surprising, to analysts of a realist proclivity, who are critiqued with a crusading tenacity by security community advocates. Thus, one prominent figure in that literature asserts that ‘the very idea of a security community is profoundly subversive of the entire realist tradition’ (Acharya, 1998), which holds an ‘exaggerated, almost vulgarized faith in the balance of power’ (Acharya, 1999, p. 9). Elsewhere, an Olympian stance is adopted, with ASEAN’s approach to security understood as a ‘damning indication of the limitations of the realist framework’ (Acharya, 2004, p. 266). Perhaps this flawed conclusion is inevitable since that author’s view is that ‘no serious investigation of ASEAN can be complete without consideration of the role of norms and the issue of identity formation’ (Acharya, 2005, p. 113).
The irony is that if ASEAN policymakers and their security community boosters continue to reject realism, they will be ruling out the most powerful tool for analyzing and managing the rise of China. Yet, this would not be the first time that such an error has occurred. An earlier generation of policymakers and academics rejected realism, and embraced an equally flawed concept with tragic consequences. The Western states saw virtue in the ahistorical concept of collective security and related attempts to outlaw war, seen in the Kellogg–Briand Pact of 1928. This more than a decade-long attempt to transcend power politics waylaid states from taking appropriate action to deal with the realities of international politics. If we are truly wiser now than our predecessors, then we should discard the concept of a security community, both for Southeast Asia and East Asia.

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Notes
1. Peter Hays Gries has countered that Mercer is overly pessimistic. Through the combination of theoretical critique and a case study of Sino-US relations, he contends that international identity dynamics are highly contingent and do not inexorably lead to conflict. Yet, in emphasizing agency so heavily in his analysis, Gries minimizes the role of structure, and ironically, given his constructivist focus, the interaction between structure and agency. This is reflected in his conclusion that the trajectory of Sino-US relations will be determined by ‘the actions of individual Chinese and Americans—both in the street and in the corridors of power’ (Gries, 2005, p. 257). Greater sensitivity to structural forces would explain the competition that has increasingly transpired between the US, existing unipole in the system and China, the most likely candidate to be an additional pole.

2. For an exception in the Asian IR literature, see Acharya (2011). For an example in the general constructivist literature, see Finnemore and Sikkink (1998).

3. Deutsch refers to four integrative processes in particular. These are: political amalgamation, assimilation, mutual interdependence and mutual responsiveness (Deutsch, 1961, pp. 99–101).

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