

Matt Smith

Welcome to Asia Rising the podcast of La Trobe Asia, where we discuss the news, views and general happenings of Asian states and societies. I'm your host Matt Smith.

The Association of South East Asian Nations, known by the acronym ASEAN, is a political and economic organisation formed 49 years ago by likeminded South East Asian countries. Over time the organisation has become the most significant force for regional co-operation in East Asia and recently has adopted ambitious goals of becoming an economically and politically secure community.

Through this it seeks to increase their member states bargaining power with the rest of the world, in particular with the major powers in the region: China, the US and Japan. But are the lofty aims of ASEAN about to crack under outside pressure and do the member states have more in common than geographic proximity?

Here to discuss the future of the regional organisation is Professor Nick Bisley, Executive Director of La Trobe Asia. Thank you for joining me Nick.

Professor Nick Bisley

Thanks Matt.

Matt Smith

So let's start with what kind of organisation is ASEAN? There's the declared intention to be influential in both economic ways and political security ways. So what are they trying to achieve and is that realistic?

Nick Bisley

Yes, ASEAN began life as you said 49 years, in 1967, five member states. Then it was Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, The Philippines and Malaysia. It's the height of the Cold War, the war in Vietnam is really going off after the US escalated their involvement in 1965 and it's very shortly after a pretty acrimonious bust up between Malaysia and Singapore and conflict between Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines - post-colonial dust ups. So it's a rough time and these countries are sitting there going, 'We're small, were pretty poor at this point in time'. Most of them are very newly independent and all of them have two big things in common, one is authoritarian political structures, so they're not democracies at all and all of them are anti-communist in their orientation.

So what they try to do, and what they did do, was set up an organisation that provides an international solidarity organisation for authoritarian, post-colonial, anti-communist countries. So make peace with one another so they could then get on with the business of domestic economic development, crucially also trying to avoid getting caught up in cold war contests. Because, if you're Thailand you're looking across the border and it's not far away, where you've got very significant conflict going on and they are acutely aware that they don't want that to happen.

So that's where it begins and over time; it's nearly fifty years old, it's become this feature of the region. It's the longest lived regional organisation in Asia by a long way, it's got a really significant role at the centre of a whole range of co-operative ventures: in fact it's very active to ensure that it is, in its own terms, a driving seat of regional co-operation.

Because it's a grouping of small countries, relatively small countries, it has always feared being overshadowed by the great powers and very aware of the risk of, you know if any of these countries are off on their own, their ability to carve out a successful path for themselves is very, very constrained or potentially quite limited by being caught up in fights between the big powers. It develops, it gets bigger.

By the late 1990's all 10 South East Asian countries have joined, so South Vietnam, Brunei joins, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar join with some various points of contestation. But, what you've got now is a funny situation where the organisation is big and ambitious in one sense and very different from the kind of thing it was when it was established in the 1960's. Because times have changed, it's now got countries polar-opposites in terms of their economic welfare, so you've got in Singapore one of the world's richest countries in per capita GDP terms, and in countries like Laos and Cambodia, some of the poorest. You've got in political systems Brunei which is literally an old-fashioned, monarchical despotism, vibrant flourishing democracies in the Philippines and Indonesia. You've got 'kinda-sorta' democracies in Malaysia, you've got hybrid regimes like Myanmar where you've got semi-democracies or semi-authoritarianism as they are creeping their way out of military rule and of course Thailand is under military dictatorship. So you've got this huge diversity of political systems, if you think back to 1967, they were all the same kind, they had the same world view, and they were all roughly in the same space economically or the same place economically speaking.

Matt Smith

Yeah, it's hard not to compare this to the EU as far as you've got an organisation of countries that share the same aim to some extent, but does ASEAN have any clout to it at all? There's no ASEAN citizenship so you can't move between borders, the political situation of every country seems to be very different, there seems to be competing ideals, there's no united currency. Is it just a figurehead kind of organisation?

Nick Bisley

Yeah, and one of ASEAN's real challenges is that when it was established it created a bunch of principles about how it was going to operate and one thing it decided very early on was to steadfastly protect the idea of sovereign independence, so no country would interfere in the affairs of others, and that any decision that the group made had to be consensual, that's to say every single member has effectively a veto over decision-making.

If you then say what you want to achieve is economic co-operation and integration of a kind of EU variety, whether it's creation of a single market, whether it's a single currency or whatever, then that flies squarely in the face of the idea that you don't interfere in the affairs of others and consensual decision making. Those two things are very hard to reconcile. What you've got now is that ambition but how do we do that in the face of these competing principles? And they're very jealously protective of these basic ideas and it's very hard to see compromise on that front.

But the organisation does have a curious level of influence because of its longevity and because of its centrality in the diplomacy of all ten of its members; so all ten members of ASEAN take the existence of ASEAN as an organisation very seriously, so it means that China, the United States, Japan to a lesser extent Russia and India (because they're a bit more peripheral in this part of the world), they kind of 'doff the cap' to some degree to ASEAN. Now they don't come in on bended knee and follow exactly what ASEAN wants, but equally they don't just treat ASEAN with complete disregard.

Here in Australia we probably saw this most obviously where in 2008-2009 then prime minister

Kevin Rudd has this, not bad idea but the execution was very poor, of this idea of an Asia/Pacific Community and said 'We need to get all of the East Asian countries plus India and Russia together at the highest level and talk about all range of matters, whether it's political military, strategic, economic...'

Matt Smith

Right, so superseding ASEAN really?

Nick Bisley

...and ASEAN went ballistic. Rudd then gives a speech in Singapore basically the mea culpa: "I'm sorry, ASEAN is the central place, any further development of institutional organisations in Asia must have ASEAN at the centre". The other really strong example of one of its offshoots, the East Asia Summit, known by the rather unlovely description of the ASEAN +3+3+2, to involve China...

Matt Smith

... to involve China and Japan.

Nick Bisley

...and that Russia and the United States and China, and Japan and South Korea and Australia and India are members and have signed up to a set of agreements on ASEAN terms, and the meeting meets after ASEAN meetings. And so ASEAN is able to attract the major powers and then said, 'We will set the tune', but of course there's this tension between ASEAN being important and let's not forget these new guys that you've brought into the tent, are in fact 3 or 4 of the world's most important economies – you can't just push them around.

So there is this tension between an organisation that has an influence, that's able to attract people, but, its capacity to change what they do and get them to commit to things, is rather more constrained.

Matt Smith

So there's some glaring problems that come up, even within the member states of ASEAN. So what's stopping them from having an influence, even within their own borders? I'm thinking in particular on the environmental issues that they want to address but seem powerless to address, the human rights abuses in Burma, that's a member state to they can't even clean-up within their own borders so to speak?

Nick Bisley

Yeah, and I think you've got a basic problem, let's say you're thinking of human rights, they have a vague charter of rights promotion that is a recent creation, it's very much something to slap on the wall and that's it. And it gets back to that basic point that the members have very different value systems. There's very few countries within ASEAN; probably Indonesia and the Philippines would probably really be the only two, who could hand on heart look at the UN conception of human rights and go 'that's for us and that's what we think needs to be protected'.

All of the others to varying degrees have pretty serious issues with aspects, if not the whole thing. And so getting an organisation to act on something as controversial as human rights in a place like ASEAN is just a non-starter.

But if you think about two issues that are not politically controversial like human rights, and that all ASEAN states would have an interest in, and yet they still can't get any movement on. One is people smuggling and illegal movement of population more generally, and the other is the environment, climate change and that sort of stuff. And it just gets back to the really basic

problems that all international organisation have which is the members have very different interests and the way in which the decision making of ASEAN is set up: i.e. consensus, means - forget it. All it takes is one country to go 'We don't want that to happen' for whatever reason. And it may be very narrow, it might be a particular sectional group within one country feels that action of that kind will disadvantage them, and that can throw a spanner in the works for the whole lot.

I think for a lot of countries, what they like about ASEAN is exactly that, it's a low cost, there's very few strings attached to joining and participating in it, is exactly what frustrates many. So the countries that want to push along with better economic co-operation or collaboration on the environment find it difficult.

Matt Smith

It's even happening again within the member states when it comes to border disputes, but let's extend that outwards then, the South China Seas. So creating a united response to China and just saying 'We don't like this', isn't something ASEAN can agree on is it?

Nick Bisley

ASEAN's got two big problems on this. One is the South China Sea dispute is a dispute between six countries, four of whom are ASEAN members. Three of their four claims, actually all four of them overlap to some degree, so there's a kind of intramural dispute between ASEAN. So Vietnam's claims which are very, very expansive, (as expansive as China's actually, they just haven't been pushing them as hard) they clash with the Philippines claims, Malaysia and with Brunei's claims. You've got that intramural problem, so how do you get a united position? Difficult.

And then what China does is not particularly rocket science. But it looks and goes, it's a consensus decision making, all we need is one person inside the tent block any co-ordinated position; which they then have done quite successfully by cultivating poor countries like Cambodia and Laos and Myanmar, to put a spanner in the works.

What ASEAN has done in the past when this flared up in the 1990's was to say, 'Ok we're not going to get a unified ASEAN position on the South China Sea disputes, but what ASEAN can do is promote a way of resolving it, to say here are some principles, here are some rules, here is some code of conduct'. That's really as far as ASEAN's got. Since China's been much more assertive, particularly since it's been building these artificial islands, ASEAN has become more and more unified, oddly enough, and some people are of the view that the thing that will really get ASEAN together is ultimately China's bullying. 'Let's put aside our respective differences, whether you're Philippine / Vietnam and let's deal with China because as a group that's the only way we can offset the huge unevenness of power that's going to be the case if each one of us tries to deal with China.'

And of course China's view has been since the 1990's to say, 'This is not a multilateral dispute, we have a series of disputes with a group of countries and so we'll deal with the Philippines, and we'll deal with Vietnam and we'll deal with Brunei and whoever on a one-on-one basis' of course that's giving them a massive advantage in that situation.

So one view is China will be the thing that brings ASEAN together and cracks the problem. The other view is China is the thing that will break it apart. The tensions that I was talking about earlier, basically the consensus decision making and economic co-operation, disputed claims and China and all of this sort of stuff, it may be the thing that pushes countries of the region to move away from the organisation and the organisation itself is acutely aware of this.

It's very, very sensitive to divided loyalties amongst its membership and we're entering a really interesting phase in South East Asia generally where, not only have we got the South China Sea dispute and ASEAN not delivering on its potential according to many, but also South East Asian countries are in a really curious spot. You look at the next couple of years at ASEAN and then South East Asia more generally and it's politically very difficult, economically it's going to be challenging particularly as the Brexit washout and the global economy and the China slowdown really begins to bite and I think ASEAN will be entering a period of existential crisis as a result of it.

Matt Smith

What happened in their response to China, they released a position didn't they and then retracted that position?

Nick Bisley

Yes, a couple of weeks ago, so in early June this year there was a special meeting of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers and the Chinese Foreign Minister, and they have these meetings regularly, once or twice a year and talk about issues – normally they're pretty dull, pretty procedural. They had signalled that they wanted to talk about the South China Sea and begin to talk about an ASEAN position, the possibilities of it. The Malaysian Foreign Ministry had drafted a position paper saying that 'For the first time, ASEAN was going to take a formal line in public. It was concerned with what China was doing as a group'.

Matt Smith

Just concerned?

Nick Bisley

Just concerned, and that steps needed to be taken to reduce the tensions. Just a fairly bland, but in the world of diplomacy where little, slight shifts in nuance and words really matter, and this was apparently very uncharacteristically robust: a full and frank exchange of views. And then, we don't know exactly who, but we think it was the Malaysians issued the statement by accident, they then had to withdraw it - they couldn't say it was in the name of all the foreign ministers, because all the foreign ministers hadn't had it, but once it's out in the electronic age 'it's out' so you can read it now. The Chinese went crazy about it and officially there was no formal decision, but in the world of carefully scripted, face saving, cautious, cautious diplomacy, this represents a real – not a rupture in the China/ASEAN relationship, but a sign of a hardening of positions.

But it's also a worrying sign because it shows that ASEAN's not able to take the heat out of this, if anything ASEAN is becoming a forum for contestation, not a mechanism for calming things down.

Matt Smith

So do you see them having a credible role then in the future of South East Asia or is the region not yet ready for that mysteriously unifying front?

Nick Bisley

It's going to need some help and it's going to need to deliver something in the face of pretty serious forces. It's possible that it can because....

Nick Bisley

...and it needs to be able to point at something and say, 'we made a difference here'?

Nick Bisley

...yeah, and it needs to have key countries, particularly countries like the Philippines and Indonesia to continue to channel all of their foreign dealings through it and to provide, not just verbal commitment to ASEAN, but also to drive ASEAN to deliver things to make people feel like it's

making the kind of contribution that it needs to. Because essentially the region is becoming much more contested between the major powers.

Matt Smith

Yeah it sounds like a lot to ask really.

Nick Bisley

It is. And particularly when the basic way in which it's been set up is not to be nimble, not to be quick, not to be decisive but to be tectonic in its movements, and that's not a particularly good mode of operation in the current environment. I mean there is a tendency to be always pessimistic about ASEAN, but I think the current period is particularly challenging for it, at least since the late '90's when it expanded and quite possibly since it's foundation. And I think the broader headwinds in the region are going to continue to provide pretty challenging circumstances.

Matt Smith

Alright, thanks Nick, we look forward to your further commentary on ASEAN as we celebrate its 50th birthday party next year. Did you get an invite?

Nick Bisley

Not yet, but I think the embossed card is winging its way through the ether as we speak.

Matt Smith

Right, dibs on your +1

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