



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (23/2003)

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## ASEAN as a Bridge between East and West

**Hiro Katsumata\***

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Critics of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have tended to dismiss the regional organization as merely a talk shop. The latest series of ASEAN meetings in Phnom Penh however have highlighted the special role of ASEAN in the global community, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, in the twenty-first century.

The ASEAN members showed deftness in handling two important issues: the Myanmar government's detention of the pro-democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, and North Korea's program to develop nuclear weapons. In both cases the ASEAN foreign ministers performed an important "bridging" role, and demonstrated the real significance of ASEAN diplomacy.

In the Myanmar issue, the foreign ministers took the unprecedented step of encouraging the Yangon military regime to release Aung San Suu Kyi, during the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM). The Joint Communiqué stated that they 'look forward to the early lifting of restrictions' placed on her. While most newspapers reported this as a surprise abandonment of the long-standing ASEAN principle of non-interference, some critics – in particular, those from Western countries – said it was still insufficient. For example, *International Herald Tribune* (18 June) implicitly encouraged ASEAN to follow the United States and impose economic sanctions against the junta, by saying that 'ASEAN should demand more.'

However, both of these two views missed the real significant point of ASEAN diplomacy. With regard to the issue of Myanmar, the ASEAN members neither abandoned the non-interference principle completely nor neglected this issue on the basis of the non-interference principle. That is to say, ASEAN neither disregarded the junta's concern nor ignored the Western countries' criticism of Myanmar. ASEAN acknowledged the concerns of both Yangon and Washington, and diplomatically sought to accommodate both parties.

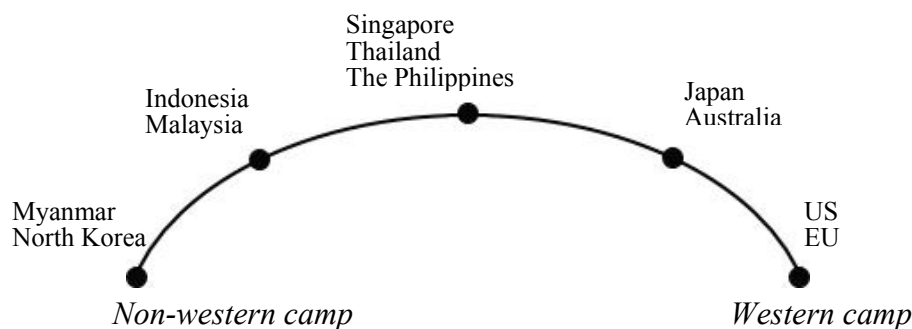
### *Bridging Role:*

The significance of ASEAN concerns its potential to serve as a bridge between "Western" countries and "non-Western" ones. ASEAN can bridge the gulf between Western states – the US and European Union (EU) members – and those countries which are generally at odds with the West in the international arena.

(No common ground)



**Figure 1:** without any framework offered by ASEAN



**Figure 2:** with a framework offered by ASEAN

In the global community today, the gap between these two groups is widening. The US and the EU members, under the banner of human rights and democracy, have been putting pressures on those who do not share their liberal values. What can be broadly categorized as non-Western countries, in turn, are dodging criticisms from their Western counterparts. Their justifications vary – the need for nation building and economic development, difference in ideologies and so on. They are not united, but what they have in common is strong opposition to the Western countries' intrusive behaviour.

What does it mean to serve as a bridge between the two opposing groups? The two diagrams illustrate the concept. In a hypothetical situation of international relations where there is no framework offered by ASEAN, there is no common ground between the two camps. The Western countries unilaterally criticize their opponents, and resort to their usual practice of imposing economic sanctions. Economic sanctions bring about suffering to citizens, but not to those in control of an authoritarian regime.

Such antagonistic measures are often counterproductive, and invite hostile responses from the other party. The relationship between the two camps easily worsens. Consider the state of international politics over the last several years. The situations in Myanmar and North Korea have not improved, despite the Western countries' strong pressures on these states.

In contrast, where the set of multilateral frameworks offered by ASEAN – including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) – exists, it serves as a bridge which connects countries in the Asia-Pacific region, whose positions on issues vary in the spectrum between the Western and non-Western camps. Countries such as Japan do understand the plight of non-Western countries; however, their policies are usually in line with those of the Western countries. For example, during the ASEAN meetings, Tokyo threatened to withdraw economic assistance to Myanmar if the human rights conditions there showed no improvement.

Even within ASEAN, each members' stances vary. Indonesian efforts to seek other members' approval for its handling of the Aceh issue demonstrate its relative closeness to the non-Western camp. This issue has been criticized by Western human rights activists for a long time. No other arrangements than the framework offered by ASEAN connect these countries in the western and non-western camps.

Having invited various countries in the Asia-Pacific to form a common framework, what can ASEAN offer to this diverse region? The series of meetings this month provided some answers.

### *Mediating the cases of Myanmar and North Korea*

With regard to the issue of Myanmar, the ASEAN members accommodated the criticism from the Western participants, and touched upon this issue in their Joint Communiqué. Yet what is notable is that ASEAN encouraged Yangon to amend its policies in its own style. Before issuing the Communiqué, ministers of the ASEAN countries had lengthy discussions with their counterpart from Myanmar, to obtain Yangon's understanding. This kind of diplomatic maneuver is different from the Western approach based on strong pressure and unilateral criticism.

With respect to the North Korean issue, again, ASEAN attempted to accommodate the concerns of both the Western participants and Pyongyang. Recognizing Pyongyang's concern, about being criticized in a multilateral setting, ASEAN addressed the Korean Peninsula issue in a different way from the Western countries' pressure diplomacy. ASEAN avoided direct criticism of Pyongyang. The Joint Communiqué of the AMM expressed the ASEAN ministers' conviction that a "peaceful resolution to the current tensions through dialogue" would be valuable and maintained that the ARF was a "useful venue for facilitating dialogue on the Korean Peninsula". This is notable in that Pyongyang had rejected the US demand for five-party talks, including Japan, China and South Korea.

It is true that ASEAN's accommodative diplomatic maneuver will not bring about any drastic change or immediate improvement of the situation. However, the importance of ASEAN's bridging role should not be underestimated. To put it in another way, what if there were no ASEAN framework to connect the diverse countries in the Asia-Pacific region? There would be no common ground between the Western and non-Western countries, and the relationship between them could easily worsen, to the detriment of the region as a whole.

Finally, the role of ASEAN should also be understood in reference to various non-traditional security issues, including terrorism. In order for the Asia-Pacific region to deal with such issues effectively, conflicts between Western and non-Western countries should be mitigated. Thus, ASEAN can facilitate cooperation between countries within the frameworks which it offers.

ASEAN's accommodative approach, expressed during the meeting, is notable in this respect. The ARF Statement on Cooperative Counter-Terrorist Action rejected "any attempt to associate terrorism with any religion, ethnicity, race or nationality," and emphasized the need to "strengthen dialogue and promote mutual understanding".

In sum, in various issue areas, including politics, as well as traditional and non-traditional security issues, ASEAN serves as a vital bridge, accommodating broader conflicting interests in the Asia-Pacific region.

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\* (Dr Hiro Katsumata is an IDSS-Sasakawa Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.)