

Relating regional crises and political cohesion from an ASEAN and EU–ASEAN perspective

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In December 2015, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) celebrated the official establishment of the ASEAN Community. Having emerged in 1967 as a regional grouping of developing countries with minimal shared interests—beyond the common concern of economic growth and national resilience, ASEAN now has established regional structures which have been vital in enhancing development and dialogue on a broad range of issues across the Southeast Asian region. Over the years, the institutional development at the regional level has been accompanied by various efforts to promote regional unity and identity. The more recent years have also displayed that the international community has been supporting these efforts for ASEAN unity and identity by showing greater recognition of ASEAN as an international actor in its own right, for example, through the establishment of numerous country delegations to ASEAN. Among the international actors, the United Nations (UN) system has played an important role in influencing positive international recognition of ASEAN, including its acknowledgement of Southeast Asia's progress in working towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Seemingly, ASEAN has overcome existential questions related to those regional arrangements, which were created in the Cold War period. It has repositioned itself in the post-Cold War international architecture and reaffirmed its organizational legitimacy, redefining "ASEANness" beyond the traditional systemic parameters.

While external recognition is important in influencing the trajectory and pace of the regional integration of ASEAN,¹ it is the intra-regional *raison d'être* that maintains and drives integration in the long run. At the same time, the dividing line between external and internal shapers of integration is vaguely defined and hence, it is difficult to disentangle these influences and discern the intra-regional *raison d'être*. In spite of this categorical complexity, the past decades suggest that ASEAN integration from within has contributed significantly to peace and economic prosperity in



the region and hence, nurtured political cohesion at the regional level. Yet, there remain political cracks within the ASEAN edifice which indicate that ASEAN's political cohesion is still built on shaky grounds despite advanced levels of intra-regional coordination, institutionalization and international recognition. Prominently, the territorial disputes in the South China Sea have raised questions about the actual functioning of ASEAN's normative foundation and the depth of its political unity.

In light of the official launch of the ASEAN Community one year ago, it is therefore high time to ask how these recent expressions of low political cohesion at the regional level can be mitigated and how ASEAN's organizational unity and identity can be strengthened so that ASEAN can display heightened levels of political cohesion. In an attempt to provide some answers to these questions, this article builds on the premise that regional integration and cohesion correlate and, thus, takes a look at selected politico-sociological framings in connection to transboundary challenges that have been applied to promote regional integration and, hence, political cohesion. Therefore, this article contends that the member states of a regional grouping are social actors who experience transboundary political and socio-economic crises within Southeast Asia as important catalysts for ASEAN regional integration. In fact, it presumes that both ASEAN regional and EU-ASEAN inter-regional cooperative dynamics and agendas have been and still are influenced by transboundary crises, which can crystallize institutional shortcomings and act as catalysts informing intra-regional and inter-regional cooperative dynamics as well as the political cohesion of the cooperation partners outside the institutionalized day-to-day processes of integration (Maier-Knapp, 2010, 2011, 2014a, 2014b).

The article acknowledges that inter-regional²² interaction can stimulate greater opportunity for intra-regional cooperation and institutionalization, which can also be conducive to processes of cohesion at the ASEAN level. Especially, inter-regionalism can assist in strengthening the level of ASEAN political cohesion normatively, since the interaction and recognition by another regional organization contributes to an environment that is favorable for the agency of the ASEAN regional level. In particular, the official EU-ASEAN inter-regional relationship is longstanding and has promoted ASEAN political cohesion in this respect. Overall, the EU has been inspirational for ASEAN regional integration, tempting former and contemporary policy-makers of both regions to name the EU a "source of inspiration for regional integration" and identify it as a lesson-provider for regional integration elsewhere (Blankert, 2012; Moller & Severino, 2006; Ruche, 2011, p. 38). Scholarly perspectives have displayed higher variability in the descriptive terminology of the

EU in Southeast Asia, ranging from ASEAN mimicry to friendlier language similar to the official terminology based on the idea of the EU as a source of inspiration.

Against the backdrop of these research assumptions, it is important to restate the central research interest of this article for the following paragraphs. That is, this article seeks to discuss selected crisis-centered framings and examine the extent to which the crises have enhanced ASEAN intra-regional and EU–ASEAN inter-regional space for interaction and, hence, fueled political cohesion at the ASEAN regional level. Although this article focuses on three prominent cases of crisis-centered framings, it furthermore alludes to other types of political frames that have been employed within the ASEAN and EU–ASEAN contexts to assist in testing the central research interest. The following paragraphs begin with an introduction and discussion of the key concepts of political cohesion and crisis. This is then followed by an analytical narrative of the ASEAN intra-regional and the EU–ASEAN inter-regional relations discussing Vietnam’s invasion of Kampuchea in 1978, the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998 and the avian influenza outbreaks in Southeast Asia in the winter of 2003–2004. These case studies have been chosen because they provide useful empirical insights to better understand crisis-centered framings and their contribution, or lack of contribution, to political cohesion in the Southeast Asian region from both an intra-regional and inter-regional perspective. Moreover, they offer a good reference point for contemporary lesson-learning in light of today’s politicized times of crises and sensitivities of identity in both the EU and ASEAN regions.

Cohesion

In this article, cohesion in the context of regions is conceived differently from conventional conceptions that have been mainly developed within Western European policy and scholarly discourses on integration and community. These conventional treatments have defined regional cohesion primarily along the lines of EU subregions and applied three-fold criteria of social, economic and political cohesiveness, basically implying a three-way emotional connectedness and identification of people with their setting. This general and comprehensive academic understanding of regional cohesion is less pertinent to the study of ASEAN as a regional grouping. Although the concept of “regional cohesion” has found its way into academic treatments of Southeast Asia, it lacks a common definition and predominantly refers to the institutional integration of ASEAN only. This notion is therefore narrow, focusing on the role of states within geo-

graphic proximity, common institutions and shared interests (e.g., Smith, 2004; Vatikiotis, 1999).

Although understandings of regional cohesion diverge from European understandings, this article acknowledges that intra-ASEAN political cohesion is more nuanced in practice. Generally speaking, nongovernmental actors in Southeast Asia are experiencing greater opportunity to inform the attitudes of governmental actors and the trajectory of regional integration and cohesion from the bottom-up, albeit at a pace that is comfortable for the ASEAN member states. This article furthermore acknowledges the role of the external environment in shaping political cohesion particularly taking into account the role of exogenous shock events and extra-regional assistance providers in the aftermath of these crises. Although this article departs from the narrow institutional definition that has essentially discarded external and non-governmental influences, it still relies on a basic definition of political cohesion which concentrates on the ASEAN regional and institutional perspective only. Moreover, it is important to note that for the purpose of clarifying the difference between ASEAN and EU understandings, this article uses a distinctive terminology of “political cohesion at the regional level” for ASEAN, instead of the common EU language of “regional cohesion.”

Crises

Considerable empirical evidence has been provided to substantiate the analytical value of transboundary crises in understanding both ASEAN regional and EU–ASEAN inter-regional cooperative dynamics (Maier-Knapp, 2010, 2011, 2014a). This article adopts a narrow conception of crises based only on those existing academic treatments of crises, which have addressed crises both within the ASEAN and EU–ASEAN contexts. In line with this approach, which I have forwarded in previous publications, this article contends that crises act as catalysts for states to reflect and proactively remedy current conditions of unpreparedness or vulnerability to preempt future crises and mitigate risks. Remedying the situation of vulnerability could, for instance, signify the active promotion of bilateral and regional cooperation, whereby normative and practical differences can be overcome. Therefore, it is assumed that within the bundle of various drivers of regional integration, there exists a type of regional integrative dynamic that builds on the primer role of crises as triggers for enhanced regional dialogue and cooperation.

In this context, it is important to keep in mind that, although crises must have a severe impact obviously to be perceived as a crisis in the first

place, they are also subject to intra-regional as well as extra-regional constructions that could steer regional integration in certain directions and hence, politicize regional integration. For instance, this implies that political actors sometimes have an interest in politicizing an issue to a crisis of national and regional priority for advancing their domestic political interests. Thus, crises can also be considered as constructed opportunities in some instances, where various actors seek to promote their interests and norms into the process of recovery.

Tracing the relationship between crises, cooperation and cohesion, 1978–2003

One month after the first ministerial meeting between the foreign ministers of the ASEAN and the European Communities (EC) member states in Brussels 20–21 November 1978, this new inter-regional dialogue forum was tested when Vietnam invaded Kampuchea at the end of December. The invasion especially pressured ASEAN to move beyond its comfort zone of regional neutrality and seek political support externally. Intra-regionally, this aggression within ASEAN's neighborhood compelled ASEAN member states to cohere politically, enhance interaction and deepen political dialogue with each other to form a united front. This benefitted intra-regional political cohesion and thus strengthened ASEAN's political voice against Vietnam at the international level. The close-to-home occurrence of the security threat had immediate impact on friend-foe linings and fueled self-understandings of ASEAN as a political actor on the basis of "threat-othering" towards Vietnam and Communism, uniting against a common political enemy.

At the inter-regional EC–ASEAN level, EC member states demonstrated support of ASEAN's position against Vietnam in the Joint Statement on Political Issues in 1980 and the subsequent EC–ASEAN joint declarations. Furthermore, they supported ASEAN's united political stance within the UN and channeled material assistance through international organizations to assist the refugees at the Thai–Kampuchean border. The Communist invasions in Kampuchea and Afghanistan entrenched shared anti-Communist worldviews between the regional groupings, cementing the common enmity–amity patterns of the international system. During the Cold War, the similarity in friend-foe perspectives prevented economic issues from becoming major political ones. Thus, the shared threat and crisis perceptions undoubtedly positively influenced the stable inter-regional political relations and extent of political cohesion within this interaction, although the trade and aid dimension of the EC–ASEAN relations

prevailed at that time (Palmujoki, 2001, p.98). From a politico-sociological perspective, this event of crisis was an important *raison d'être* for intra-regional interaction, as well as inter-regional bonding, although greater interactions and aspirations towards an inter-regional security community never followed despite the threat commonality during the Cold War period (Peou, 2002).

With the ending of the Cold War and hence, the final days of the uniting East–West overlay, EC–ASEAN political relations steadily expanded horizontally, as well as normatively. Intra-European advancements in political integration impacted the normative self-understanding of the EC/EU both internally and externally. At the same time, the changed international environment influenced European normative assertiveness externally. Human rights became an increasing political concern within the EC–ASEAN relationship (Palmujoki, 1997, p. 273). However, economic interests remained the centerpiece of this relationship, and they continued to dominate the political dimension of EC–ASEAN relations; not least, since the ideological change of the international system provided an environment conducive to inter-regional cooperation extending domestic liberalization and economic incentives.

In the Southeast Asian countries, the economic paradigm and outward-orientation intensified with the advancement of domestic liberalization processes. Internationally, these countries benefitted from the various low-barrier trade-oriented arrangements that were proceeding, including prominently the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). The focus on economic growth and free markets, however, resulted in negligence of political integrative efforts regulating trade and financial flows within Southeast Asia. Confidence in the inherent balancing dynamics of the market shattered with the unfolding of the Asian Financial Crisis when existing national and regional market institutions were inadequate to safeguard the collapse of the financial and real markets. Until then, institutional integration in the financial sector of these countries was relatively unheard of since the 1970s, and thus, state and regional institutions were unprepared to step in and assume a regulatory role.

The crisis spurred regional integrative efforts and reactivated existing swap arrangements from 1977 through the Chiang Mai Initiative. However, there appeared to be minimal correlation between the institutional efforts and the degree of political cohesion among Southeast Asian leaders in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis. It was acknowledged that the contagious effect of this crisis needed to be addressed at the regional level and a shared sense of discomfort with the dominance of the international financial institutions indeed emerged. Since the impact of the crisis

was uneven and the assistance for recovery by the international financial institutions was mainly country-focused, processes of political cohesion at the regional level took place minimally. During the immediate outbreak of the crisis, political cohesion at the regional level crystallized mainly in relation to negative perceptions of international assistance and conditionality, nurturing anti-Western attitudes across the Asian region from Japan to Thailand due to a common perception of being disadvantaged. In this sense, the shared plight and the negative perceptions of Western assistance informed understandings of Asianness and hence, a kind of East Asian political cohesion was shaped by the shared negative experience and perceptions vis-à-vis the West.

Viewed in historical perspective, however, the Asian Financial Crisis appears less to have been a decisive ideological watershed on the road to cohesion because the high degrees of regional institutional activism did not produce veritable political cohesion. Rather, the crisis can be considered to be one phase in a cycle of external shock and incremental adaptation to market forces than correlated to regional identity-building (cf. Felker, 2001, p. 51). Nonetheless, enhanced regional integration at the ASEAN and ASEAN Plus Three level triggered a slight shift in the intra-regional mode of inter-governmental cooperation and one could say that some ideational ramifications followed. These, however, remained largely declaratory and could not reconcile the divergent perspectives on traditional and long-standing principles of non-interference and national sovereignty among the ASEAN members.

At the EU-ASEAN inter-regional level, the crisis did not trigger considerable interaction that could have influenced cohesion at the ASEAN regional level. Within the wider Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) inter-regional framework, discussion and action on the Asian Financial Crisis was stimulated, including, among others, the Tianjian Initiative and the ASEM Trust Funds. However, my previous research has shown that assistance to individual East Asian countries from the Tianjian Initiative and ASEM Trust Funds 1 and 2 clearly outweighed the support to projects aimed at strengthening regional mechanisms (Maier-Knapp, 2014a, p. 37–38). In addition to the financial assistance through the ASEM initiatives, substantial financial assistance of the EU and its member states was channeled through international financial institutions. Here again, assistance mainly aimed at alleviating the plight of affected countries individually, neglecting the opportunity to promote ASEAN regional projects.

At the EU-ASEAN level, the political stand-off on Myanmar during the Asian Financial Crisis led to the postponement of the official inter-regional dialogue. Thus, the official EU-ASEAN interaction remained mute during the time of the financial crisis. Individual EU member states,

however, engaged in bilateralism with individual ASEAN member states, because they were interested in retrieving the loans. With the resumption of the official EU–ASEAN dialogue in 1999 after the temporary Myanmar stand-off, there was opportunity for inter-regional best-practice-sharing and technical support for regional integration and the Southeast Asian side expressed greater interest in the EU's experience of monetary integration. Hence, in the early 2000s a renewed inter-regional integrative dynamic set in and was furthermore spurred by the various transboundary security problems necessitating coordination across regions. These concerns were put on the EU and ASEAN regional and inter-regional agendas and addressed, among others, the US-led War on Terror, environmental pollution, human and drug trafficking, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and pandemic outbreaks, including the severe outbreaks of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome and avian influenza in 2003.

The avian influenza outbreaks in the winter of 2003–2004 in Southeast Asia compelled greater intra-regional coordination among the ASEAN member states and became a security priority at the various ASEAN meetings. However, the region was unequally affected geographically and temporally, and thus, the regional level was not the preferred level of response and could not assist affected countries facing issues of capacity for vaccination, culling, virus testing and other necessary responsive procedures. ASEAN member states preferred cooperation with the relevant international institutions, prominently the World Health Organization (WHO), the Organization for Animal Health (OIE) and the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). These organizations were the key orchestrators of assistance and the EU and its member states also channeled considerable support through them. At the same time, being the major importer of poultry from Southeast Asia, the EU had an immediate interest in protecting its consumers after the first few suspected cases among poultry were reported in Vietnam. Alongside assistance through the relevant international institutions, the European Commission and the EU member states supported affected countries individually. This region-to-region support complemented and strengthened the main level of response in Southeast Asia, which was the national level that mainly drew upon the support of the WHO and OIE.

The third case study has shown that crisis-centered narratives concerning transboundary challenges in Southeast Asia post-Cold War have strong national and global orientations focused on strengthening these levels of response. In spite of the acceptance across-the-board of ASEAN member states that such transboundary and unconventional security challenges pose an opportunity for regional integration and cohesion, the national and global foci suggest that they are actually qualifying the opportunity

for regional integration and cohesion. Thus, this renders moot the causality between crisis and regional and inter-regional integration premised at the outset, to some extent. Nevertheless, the example of the avian influenza has affirmed the central observations in the previous case studies and indicated that in the aftermath of the first outbreaks both the EU and ASEAN member states have been paying greater attention to the shared risks and challenges in view of the possible spill-over of the negative impact.

Indeed, since the end of the Cold War, the EU and ASEAN groupings have been discovering a broad range of shared horizontal issues and cross-border challenges. The EU and its member states possess the regional experience, knowledge and resources to assist ASEAN member states in mitigating vulnerabilities, risks and crises effectively, while promoting resilience and adaptive capacity at both the member state and ASEAN regional level. The EU's experience in horizontal or functional matters in connection to regional integration is of unique and added value to ASEAN member states and has been shared with Southeast Asian partners through various firmly established EU–ASEAN dialogue mechanisms independent from the outlined cooperative dynamics originating in crisis situations and constructions.

Implications for 2015 and beyond

Essentially, the uniting underlay of anti-Communism during the Cold War has now been replaced by a narrative of complex interdependence and issue commonality at both the regional and inter-regional levels. In spite of the changed nature of the threat environment, this new narrative has also been conducive to regional and inter-regional integration because of the transboundary nature of the many contemporary challenges which demand cooperation of states in geographic proximity or of economic and functional interdependence. Because of this increased awareness of transboundary risks and crises in today's times, we are witnessing enhanced managerial efforts at the ASEAN regional as well as at the EU–ASEAN inter-regional levels, although at the latter to a lesser extent. At the same time, with rising levels of capacity and managerial institutionalization, crises in Southeast Asia should then be increasingly considered as extraordinary events that will only drive regional integration substantially if normal levels of regional preparedness cannot be warranted. Indeed, when the Sovereign Debt Crisis unfolded in the Western hemisphere in late 2008, East Asian economies were quick to agree on measures within the ASEAN Plus Three framework and remained relatively resilient over the period of the crisis. This quick mobilization of leadership and consen-

sus can be treated as evidence for East Asia's improved political cohesion due to effective institutional learning and capacity-building post-Asian Financial Crisis.

In the eyes of the Asian countries, the crisis furthermore demonstrated that they cannot rely on the European institutional integration experience as a source of inspiration. While the current crises in the Western hemisphere are functioning as a negative learning experience and are a warning to Southeast Asian countries in regard to the perils of interdependence, they have generated greater European interest in the EU–Asia relations. This interest implies a changed quality of inter-regionalism in connection to the motivations and drivers of interaction, raising the economic and political profile of the East Asian region vis-à-vis the EU. Simultaneously, this means that the EU is also keen to see ASEAN as a politically cohesive and stable region, and thus, it is taking greater interest in opportunities of dialogue and threat commonalization of cross-border challenges. On the Southeast Asian side, it is expected, however, that the impact of this enhanced inter-regional opportunity will be moderated primarily according to the need and will of the ASEAN member states.

For example, in the more recent past, the Khao Preah Vihar dispute between Thailand and Cambodia has been a considerable political issue, displaying one of many political rifts between the member states. Here, involved ASEAN member states were unwilling to accept initial attempts at conflict mediation through inside, as well as outside partners. The disputants rejected intra-ASEAN mechanisms of dispute settlement and the offer of mediation by the ASEAN chair at the time. While a UN attempt for resolution was finally accepted, there is still considerable distrust toward the ASEAN dispute settlement mechanism and the other international mechanisms, underlining the limitations of institutional integration and political cohesion in ASEAN. Beyond such intra-ASEAN fault lines, recent intra-ASEAN discord is fueled by the outreach of China to Brunei, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, illustrating especially that the political cohesion at the regional level is not an automatism that emerges or goes hand in hand with the institutional integration of ASEAN.

Conclusions

Recognizing that socio-economic and political heterogeneity in Southeast Asia have acted as an important origin, trigger and expression of low levels of political cohesion at the ASEAN regional level, the aim of this article was to contend that crisis-centered framings of regional and inter-regional cooperation and integration could assist in managing this heterogeneity

and influence the degree of political cohesion at the ASEAN regional level. Specifically, this article drew upon a historical and empirical discussion of three case studies to work out the various crisis-related sociological interpretations and impacts on integration and political cohesion at the ASEAN regional level. At the beginning of the discussion, it was assumed that regional and inter-regional integration positively influenced levels of political cohesion at the regional level. This relationship was observed during the Cold War period, when the East–West divide acted as an ideological commonality intra- and inter-regionally. Thus, intra-ASEAN, as well as inter-EC–ASEAN, unity and political cohesion benefitted significantly from definitions of Communist states as the clear enemies.

With the ending of the Cold War, threat perceptions and the nature of crises changed, sociological strategies of othering could no longer work efficiently in raising levels of political cohesion. Sociological approaches of threat-othering and commonalization remain important but are related increasingly to sporadic enmity-amity coalitions and non-traditional threats, to which sociological strategies of othering were difficult to apply in order to strengthen intra-group cohesion consistently. Nevertheless, post–Cold War these so-called nontraditional and transboundary crises have provided an important framework to push for ASEAN regional, as well as EU–ASEAN inter-regional, integration on the basis of shared interests and threat perceptions. The various contemporary cross-border challenges and crises in Southeast Asia still display the ongoing utility of the crisis- or threat-centered narrative for regional integration. However, this does not mean that higher levels of political cohesion at the regional level have resulted and will emerge from this, even if regional institutional integration is advanced. At most, only incipient political cohesion can be ascribed to contemporary attempts of issue commonalization.

Integral to higher levels of political cohesion are longer interactionism and greater homogenization across the region. This requires substantial improvement in capacity-building, governance and inclusion of civil society actors. At the same time, it is suggestive that regional and inter-regional integrative policies have become more open towards a diffuse understanding of state responsibility which actually places higher trust and resources into civil society. Keeping in mind that strategies of threat commonality are only fully efficient if governments are mindful of the important role of societal actors as audience, recipient and contributor to the management of transboundary issues and crises, the ASEAN Community-building process could allow more horizontal and vertical channels of interaction with the people of ASEAN.

Although contemporary transboundary issues and crises are re-defining the quality and dynamic of ASEAN's trajectory of institution-

focused regional integration, they continue to be treated along the lines of the smallest common denominator delimiting regional and inter-regional integration and hence, the effectiveness of crisis-centered interpretations. At the present stage, it appears that, despite enhanced regional and inter-regional integration, traditional policy practices and principles delimit the creative space and political bonding opportunity for sociological strategies to improve ASEAN political cohesion that is triggered by crises. Thus, crisis-centered framings may have been more effective when ASEAN was lacking an institutional vision and program for action for the near future. Today, crisis-centered framings do not appear to generate the desired far-reaching stimulus for ASEAN institutional integration and political cohesion, moderating bilaterally and intergovernmentally oriented ASEAN interaction within and without the region.

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NOTES

1. This view refers, in particular, to the material benefits from outside which remain important facilitators of institution-building and policy-making, as well as implementation, at both the member state and regional level.
2. This article understands inter-regional interaction in accordance with existing definitions prominently provided by Heiner Hänggi and Jürgen Rüländ, who consider inter-regionalism in connection to old regionalism of the Cold War period. Thus, generally speaking, inter-regionalism is viewed as a multi-sectoral and official interaction between two regional groupings.

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