

Building an ASEAN Community: Track 2 Diplomacy & ASEAN-ISIS



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Introduction: ASEAN's Aspirations & Track 2

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is now moving towards becoming a community by 2015, with economic, political-security and socio-cultural pillars. ASEAN has, moreover, reached out to convene key dialogues across Asia with major regional powers and the United States. These developments, while significant, do not aim for union *à la* Europe, and indeed must consider the diversity and norm of non-intervention that continues amongst its members.

In these efforts, ASEAN has sought ways to engage citizen groups and sensitive concerns, such as human rights. Although there is some effort towards becoming a “people’s ASEAN”, the steps so far are fledgling, with much still centering on government action and involvement.

With ASEAN shifting – from an almost singular emphasis on sovereignty and intergovernmental process towards a more integrated and inclusive community – what has been called “Track 2 diplomacy” can play an important role.

Track 2 diplomacy is the practice of meetings that engage think-tank experts and policy-oriented academics in dialogues and analyses to generate ideas and recommendations for the government. Such meetings may involve government officials and policymakers (known as “Track 1” in contrast) but, if so, their inclusion is on a personal basis and not to formally represent their government positions.

Traditionally, Track 2 meetings have been used as a forum for more open dialogue and thinking, or indeed for preliminary discussion on sensitive security issues, where it is beneficial to discuss matters in an unofficial forum. Participants do not bind governments and thus may speak more freely. The outcomes and conclusions can then be fed back to governments, which may opt to take on board useful suggestions.

As such, with new directions set and encountering many sensitive areas for official diplomacy, ASEAN and the major powers in the region can and should utilize Track 2 as much as they have before, and indeed even more. Track 2 processes can serve as an important bridge between what currently exists and future aspirations.

Past Record, Promises & Limits

Track 2 diplomacy in the region has thus been reasonably successful in supplementing official diplomacy and providing intellectual context for ASEAN cooperation. Track 2 in ASEAN and the

network of ASEAN-Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) have also provided intellectual input and content to government initiatives, to be of influence in intergovernmental processes.

There are good reasons why Track 2 diplomacy exists and has proven useful, although there are also limits that must be understood.

Arguably, Track 2 diplomacy is very much in line with the diplomatic culture and conventions favored by ASEAN and other Asian states in regional cooperation. It fits well with what has come to be known as “the ASEAN Way” – soft regionalism, multilateralism, inclusion of all parties, avoidance of confrontation and arbitration, decision-making by consensus, and an aversion to overly formal institutions.

The act of dialogue – whether amongst governments or in Track 2 – can serve as a confidence-building measure. It has been argued that Track 2 processes may have a “socialization” effect on participants. By encouraging interaction and greater understanding of each other’s national standpoints, Track 2 diplomacy could be considered a process-oriented rather than results-oriented approach to security.

This can be useful for sensitive security issues. For instance, Indonesia has hosted a series of workshops on “Managing Potential Conflicts in the South China Sea” since 1990. Notably, this Track 2 process has involved China actively and observers believe that Beijing’s engagement at the informal multilateral level bodes well.

The events of recent months in the South China Sea point, however, to the limitation of these Track 2 processes. Track 2 cannot of itself cement stability, especially when governments decide to take up more assertive positions, or when nationalistic sentiments among citizens spike. But if governments wish for a confidential setting for discussion, Track 2 can provide a quieter and more rational setting for discussions on the management of sensitivities.

Moreover, note the territorial disputes in Northeast Asia. Official diplomacy – both confidential and public – has struggled because of the strong sense of nationalism and the lack of trust and avenues for dialogue between officials and policymakers. A back-door Track 2 process could potentially be a useful and additional tool when governments publicly face domestic pressures from citizens that limit the leeway for negotiation.

Even more than on specific and sensitive issues, Track 2 think tanks in the Asia-Pacific region also hold broader dialogue mechanisms on international relations and security. These include the annual Asia-Pacific Roundtable, organized by the ASEAN-ISIS, and the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), which ASEAN-ISIS also played a key role in founding.



Participants at the 2012 ASEAN-ISIS-IIR Dialogue, Oct. 5-6, Singapore, co-organized by the Singapore Institute of International Affairs and Institute of International Relations (IIR) Taiwan

Both the Asia-Pacific Roundtable and CSCAP pre-dated and in some ways helped usher in the first ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) between governments. While the ARF is not immune from criticism, it has become the foremost multilateral dialogue for security, and Track 2 think tanks continue to try to cultivate a close relationship with the ARF. Officials have also mobilized a number of Track 2 figures to serve as “experts” and “eminent persons” in the ARF – officially appointed but independent.

As ASEAN and other regional dialogues and institutions have developed and changed, so too has the nature of Track 2 diplomacy had to adapt. The experience of the ASEAN-ISIS network, a key player in Track 2 diplomacy for ASEAN and Asia, demonstrates these changes and challenges.

ASEAN-ISIS: Past, Present & Future

The ASEAN-ISIS is a network of 10 regional think tanks and academic institutes. Founded in September 1984 by think tanks from the original five ASEAN member states, ASEAN-ISIS now comprises 10 think tanks with a representative from each member state, expanding as ASEAN itself has grown.

Member institutes of ASEAN-ISIS have varying levels of funding and capacity, and autonomy from their governments. While the founding members of the network are all formally independent of governments, several newer ASEAN-ISIS members are actually departments within their ministries for foreign affairs. Similar issues persist in Track 2 across the region, with governments like China's controlling and funding several significant think tanks.

This is to be expected given that some states – being socialist in nature – control the organs of policy. It is thus unreasonable to expect Asian countries to assert an independence as some Western think tanks do. But this is not necessarily a limitation; indeed it can be seen as a factor that differentiates Track 2 diplomacy (properly termed) from other think-tank discussions – this is that the Track 2 think tank operates in a relationship to the official process that is more proximate

and directly relevant, compared to more academic think tanks.

Thus while dialogues and recommendations from Track 2 may differ from official positions, there is some prospect that these views may be considered by officials. This prospect colors the nature and outcomes of Track 2. In some ways, even the independent Track 2 institutions wish to be independent of the official lines of control, but not to be irrelevant to the official policy formation processes. The work is therefore considerably removed from the academic and theoretical work that characterizes modern universities and many think tanks.

This proximity and prospective relevance to the official processes can be a strength of Track 2. It can, however, also be a limitation in Track 2 institutions' dealings with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society groups that are emerging across ASEAN and Asia.

ASEAN's ambition to create a community by 2015 includes plans for a socio-cultural pillar. More broadly, ASEAN has seen that the community has to be relevant to the peoples of ASEAN, and not simply to government elites. The importance of community building at the grassroots level was enshrined in the concept of a “people-oriented ASEAN” in the ASEAN Charter of 2007. According to Article 1.13, one of the purposes of ASEAN is “to promote a people-oriented ASEAN in which all sectors of society are encouraged to participate in, and benefit from, the process of ASEAN integration and community building.”

The governments of ASEAN have therefore begun to engage with various civil society groups and NGOs. Some governments have been more open to this than others. But almost all ASEAN Summits in the last decade have had a process to engage with civil society and NGOs – not only at the national level, but at a regional level, with government representatives. In 2000, ASEAN-ISIS organized the first ASEAN People's Assembly (APA). This event was perhaps the first time regional civil society organizations in ASEAN had met as a cohesive body. The ASEAN-ISIS and especially the ISDS-Philippines

within the network have continued with the process until the last APA, the 7th Assembly, held in Manila in 2009.

Several ASEAN governments, in their capacity as ASEAN chairs, have also backed similar events in conjunction with their hosting of the official ASEAN Summit. As the ASEAN chair in 2005, Malaysia organized the first ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC), based on the example of the APA. This has since developed into an annual affair held in conjunction with the APA, and another newer meeting called the ASEAN People's Forum, an independent process managed by think tanks and governments. For example, in 2007, when Singapore hosted ASEAN, the SIIA worked with the ASEAN Secretariat to organize and chair the ACSC as a meeting separate from the APA and the People's Forum.

However, this form of engagement is still in its infancy, and has already encountered setbacks. In 2009, when Thailand hosted ASEAN, the meeting for civil society held in Cha-am was marred by a walkout by some civil society organizations after they claimed certain representatives had been barred from the proceedings, or replaced with government-approved nominees.

Thus while ASEAN has demonstrated willingness to engage with civil society, and there has been some institutional support for this process, this is still an area that needs attention from all stakeholders. As the APA initiative and similar meetings have demonstrated, there is a role for Track 2 think tanks to serve as a bridge between officials and civil society bodies – although that is a role not without its own challenges and difficulties.

Another way Track 2 think tanks work with NGOs can be seen in the field of the environment. In this area, a number of think tanks have been working across the region to further analyze and make policy recommendations to deal with the trans-boundary haze caused by fires from Indonesia, as well as issues such as climate change and nuclear energy. Some of these, like the SIIA of Singapore, ISIS Malaysia and CSIS of Indonesia are part of the ASEAN-ISIS network, but on these issues have worked alongside non-governmental organizations such as Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF).

Going Forward

Along with the recognition of the need for community engagement, the political landscape of ASEAN is also changing. With the political transformation of Indonesia since the fall of President Suharto in 1998, democracy is now more present in ASEAN than ever before. The recent developments in Myanmar are emblematic of these changes. Other countries such as Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore are also experiencing unprecedented opening in their politics, with more active citizen voices. Issues such as the trafficking of women also have come increasingly into focus.

To reflect this shift, Track 2 processes must also change if they are to remain relevant. For ASEAN-ISIS, the longest-serving process, its member think tanks have a record on issues such as democracy and human rights. These will need to come to the forefront more than ever before. That said, not all ASEAN countries and ASEAN-ISIS network members are comfortable with such discussions, and these platforms will have to be further developed if they are to become

avenues that influence ASEAN policy.

Similarly Track 2 think tanks will need to give more attention to issues that concern economic integration. This will support the work of ASEAN governments to create an ASEAN Economic Community by 2015. The work of think tanks can indeed go beyond investment and trade issues to look at other aspects of connectivity projects that concern infrastructure, energy ties and the movement of peoples.

Through the media, conferences, and public education campaigns, ASEAN-ISIS think tanks have been promoting understanding and greater awareness about ASEAN. As ASEAN approaches 2015, these efforts need to continue and deepen.

There are also efforts to build greater Asian regionalism and resilience in light of global uncertainty, such as a proposed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a free trade area at the ASEAN+6 level (linking ASEAN with China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand). Correspondingly, efforts have been undertaken to widen Track 2 efforts to match this wider footprint. One effort is with the ASEAN+3 think tanks, and another has been through ASEAN-ISIS anchoring ASEAN+1 dialogues with counterpart think tanks in Japan, China and South Korea.

ASEAN-ISIS has also used its Track 2 status to advantage to establish regular dialogues with Taiwanese think tanks, to ensure exchange and understanding when official governmental relations with Taiwan are lacking.

The institution of Track 2 diplomacy has thus far been reasonably successful in the region, but it is critical that ASEAN-ISIS and other think tanks in Asia rise to meet new challenges and circumstances. Institutions are not unchanging, and processes must adapt to reflect new realities. **JS**

Sidebar

The founding members of ASEAN-ISIS in 1984 were Indonesia's Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Malaysia's Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS Malaysia), the Philippines' Institute for Strategic and Development Studies (ISDS), the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) and Thailand's Institute for Security and International Studies (ISIS-Thailand). The network now also includes the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP), the Institute of International Relations (IIR Vietnam), the Institute of Foreign Affairs of Laos (IFA), the Brunei Darussalam Institute of Policy and Strategic Studies (BDIPSS), and most recently the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MYSIS). The timing of ASEAN-ISIS's expansion has not always precisely paralleled that of ASEAN; for instance, Brunei's BDIPSS only joined ASEAN-ISIS in 2000, some 15 years after the country entered ASEAN. However, in general ASEAN-ISIS has evolved to better reflect and support ASEAN's official processes. The Myanmar representative to ASEAN-ISIS, for example, has recently become the network's newest member after a long period of holding observer status, much in the way that Myanmar has been fully embraced by its ASEAN neighbors since its reforms.

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