Coalition Building in ASEAN

Orlando S. Mercado, PhD
OUTLINE

• Present issues concerning ASEAN (focus on South China Sea issue)
• ASEAN Way – evolution, changes, current mechanisms
• ASEAN Way: a stumbling block to ASEAN coalition building?
• Recommended changes
• Areas where ASEAN coalitions can be built
What is happening at sea?

- Increased tensions in East China Sea and South China Sea: “flashpoint of global consequence”
What is happening at sea?

- Territorial and maritime boundary disputes
  - Sovereignty over ocean areas
  - Full-fledged islands, but also atolls, sandbanks, reefs
  - Involvement of external powers: US, China, India, Japan, etc.
  - Major shipping routes passing through the disputed areas
What is happening at sea?

• MILITARIZATION
  – Deployment of heavily armed vessels
  – Stand-offs, clashes
  – Arms modernization (e.g. submarine acquisition)
  – Chinese naval and air force expansion (artificial islands, military bases)
What is happening at sea?

• Mutual distrust and rising nationalism
  – Hard positions, difficulty of compromise
What has ASEAN done so far?

• Multilateral institutions (e.g. ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting, Track 2 initiatives, etc.)
• Consultation for legally-binding “Code of Conduct”
• Legal approach: Philippines’ recent victory in UNCLOS arbitration
Concrete results?
Why ASEAN?

• US not full-fledged hegemon (not anymore)
• China still a rising power
• Internal and external vulnerabilities (e.g. domestic problems, changing geopolitics)
• Support of the “rest of Asia” is CRUCIAL
The importance of the “rest of Asia” and ASEAN

• Many countries with substantial economic, political and military powers in Asia
• Substantial bargaining powers in the “great game”
• Policies of the “rest of Asia” will have impacts on future of Asia
• ASEAN as a critical player
ASEAN as a coalition of “swing states”

‘It seems nobody is taking me seriously... I need a personal assistant, a fitness program and a PR consultant.’
ASEAN Way:

NATUTULOG SA PANSITAN
ASEAN Way principles

- Non-interference, non-use of force and peaceful resolution of conflict
- Promotion of regional autonomy and collective self-reliance
- Rejection of multilateral military pacts, acceptance of bilateral defense cooperation pursued by each of the member-states
- Preference for socio-cultural norms vs. legal-rational norms

Musyawarah Mufakat
Evolution of ASEAN Way

- 1967 ASEAN Declaration
- 1971 ZOPFAN Declaration
- 1976 Declaration of ASEAN Concord and TAC
- ASEAN Regional Forum
- 2003 ASEAN Concord
- 2008 ASEAN Charter
ASEAN dilemmas, so far. . .

- Regional stability vs. individual strategic needs
- Internal cohesion vs. external cohesion
- ASEAN way as contributor vs. ASEAN way as barrier
Arguments in favor of ASEAN Way

• Drew boundaries of Southeast Asia
• Bolstered legitimacy and relevance of ASEAN as default mechanism for regional cooperation
• Stabilized the region, kept wars from breaking out → boost foreign investments, economic growth
• Compatibility with pre-existing norms adopted by Asian powers (China, Japan, India) and other external powers (US)
Limitations

• Meant to manage/control conflicts, not resolve them ("turning a blind eye")
• Consensus impedes efforts to establish compliance, enforcement
• Problem of relative interest (regional stability vs. strategic needs)
• Decision-making at the pace of the least-willing member-state, settling with "lowest common denominator"
Is ASEAN Coalition building possible with ASEAN Way?

• Greater demand for ASEAN to act as a monolithic, uniform organization (“to keep up with the times”), but . . .
  – Significant disparities among member-states (difficult to reach consensus, consultations may hamper)
  – Lack of effective sanctioning mechanisms, binding policies that would impact ASEAN states (principle of non-interference)
The ASEAN “Coalition”
CONCLUSION

• ASEAN mechanisms for ensuring centrality can only be enforced with adequate political commitment and joint cooperation
• ASEAN was not created to confront conflicts, but this can and MUST change
• Shared sovereignty approach may be the way to go, but is not an easy process
• ASEAN must break existing trade-offs in governance with new decision-making models and mechanisms
How to make it work?

• Revisiting the ASEAN Way (which does not work?)
• “ASEAN minus X” and “2+x” decision-making formulas
• Need for a less “ministerial” and more functional role for ASEAN Chair, Secretary-General, Secretariat
• Going beyond the ASEAN Way: how much sovereignty should ASEAN states give up?
Areas for coalition-building

- Climate Change
- Biosecurity
- Biodiversity conservation
- Transnational Crimes (e.g. human trafficking, illegal drug trade, terrorism)
“You need to form a grand coalition, and you need to put your ideological differences aside and work together to focus on people's basic needs. You can't eat sharia.”

- Mohamed ElBaradei, Egyptian diplomat and law scholar