



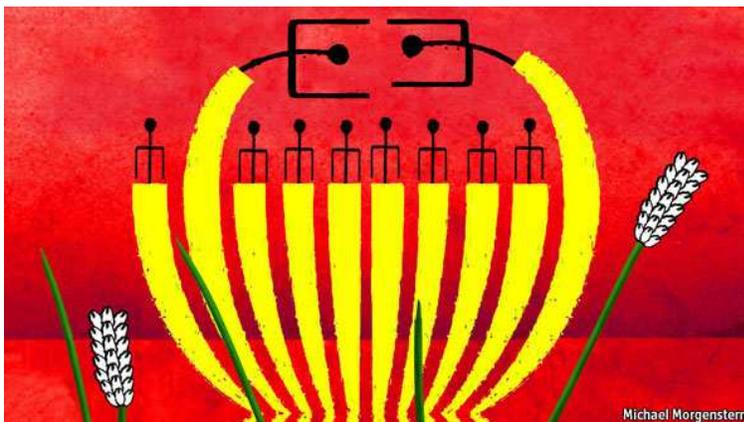
Banyan

Loose stalks posing as a sheaf

As two of its members square up, ASEAN tries to do more than just hold the coats

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0 Like 148



JUST over two years ago the ten members of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) adopted a common charter with all the fanfare due a hard-fought agreement. It lists ASEAN's 15 "purposes". The very first is "to maintain and enhance peace, security and stability and further strengthen peace-oriented values in the region." So it is disappointing for the organisation to find soldiers from two of its members, Thailand and Cambodia, shooting at each other over their disputed border at the Preah Vihear temple. Worse, neither party wants ASEAN to play peacemaker. ASEAN is just not that sort of a club.

To be sure, its Thai secretary-general, Surin Pitsuwan, offered the organisation's help as a mediator. And Marty Natalegawa, foreign minister of Indonesia, which holds the rotating ASEAN chairmanship, dutifully headed off to Phnom Penh and Bangkok. That he was welcome at all is hailed by some senior regional diplomats as an historic breakthrough for ASEAN. But Thailand would prefer to keep the dispute as a purely bilateral one. Cambodia would love to see it become an international issue, yet has spurned ASEAN. Its prime minister, Hun Sen, has instead involved the United Nations Security Council.

Not for the first time, ASEAN finds itself ruing the mind-your-own-business ideals on which it prides itself. Pavin Chachavalpongpun, a scholar at the Institute of South-East Asian Studies in Singapore, says that Cambodia and Thailand are in clear breach of their charter and other ASEAN obligations. Yet ASEAN has no way of enforcing compliance. Expulsion is unthinkable, and it has no other obvious sanctions to hand.

The association has always prized camaraderie over confrontation, consensus over contention and, above all, scrupulous respect for national sovereignty over even well-intentioned meddling. It used to be joked that the main qualifications for attendance at its ministerial bashes were the ability to speak English, and a fondness for golf, karaoke and durian, a pungent fruit.

The easy-going bonhomie has helped unite ten very diverse countries. They include an Islamic sultanate (Brunei), a wealthy city-state (Singapore), two poor communist dictatorships (Vietnam and Laos) and an even poorer military junta now posing as a parliamentary democracy

(Myanmar). Intra-ASEAN trade, boosted by an inchoate free-trade area, has boomed; ASEAN institutions (and meetings) have proliferated.

ASEAN's achievements should not be belittled. Founded in the late 1960s, after a tense period of "konfrontasi" by Indonesia, it succeeded in integrating the archipelagic giant. And much as the European Union moved from cementing peace in western Europe to healing cold-war divides, ASEAN, founded out of anticommunist solidarity, in 1995 admitted Vietnam. Most impressively, deft diplomacy has made ASEAN central to pan-Asian regionalism. So far this amounts to little more than a bewildering plethora of talking shops. But ASEAN has helped South-East Asia, sandwiched between India and China, punch above its weight.

In a crisis, however, golf, karaoke and durian do not quite cut it. In the late 1990s ASEAN was powerless in face of a series of blows. First came the region-wide financial collapse and environmental disaster—the haze of smog from forest fires on Sumatra and Borneo. Then, in 1999, an eruption of violence in what was the Indonesian province of East Timor required an Australian-led intervention force to restore order.

In retrospect, ASEAN made a big mistake when it rushed to expand its membership to include all the members of geographic South-East Asia, adding Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. One reason was to mark its 30th birthday, in 1997, though that plan was thwarted by a bloody coup staged by Mr Hun Sen. Cambodia had to wait a year for admission, after which the organisation's logo—a sheaf of ten rice stalks—finally made sense. A second reason was to stop Myanmar from becoming, in the words of one regional diplomat at the time, "a cockpit of Sino-Indian rivalry on South-East Asia's rim". Since then the influence in Myanmar of both India and, especially, China has grown, while ASEAN's decision-making and diplomacy have been handicapped by the membership of a government abhorrent to the West.

The later members joined ASEAN precisely because it had no supranational authority. This makes it even harder to respond cohesively to a flare-up. And, as Kripa Sridharan, author of a book on Asian regionalism, puts it, ASEAN has never been for settling conflicts but rather for "conflict mitigation". In that sense, Mr Natalegawa's intervention in this dispute does indeed signal a bigger role for ASEAN. But some in the region argue that is not nearly enough. A number of intra-ASEAN quarrels still fester—over boundaries in the South China Sea, for example—while the region's armies are engaged in hectic modernisation, though admittedly largely in response to worries about China. To raise its profile and clout, ASEAN recruited, in Mr Surin, a former foreign minister, an activist and persuasive boss. It has outlined ambitious plans to achieve a regional "community" by 2015 and modified an absolute insistence on non-interference.

Not ready for kick-off

The response to the violence at Preah Vihear, however, shows that non-interference is still ASEAN's default position, which is unlikely to change soon. A more hopeful approach to regional integration may be that mooted at the most recent foreign ministers' meeting in January: a proposal to bid for the joint hosting of the football World Cup in 2030. The obstacles would be tremendous in terms of logistics, infrastructure and politics (what would Aung San Suu Kyi say?). But the ministers have at least put their finger on a passion, currently squandered on the English Premier League, that binds the region as tightly as the taste for durian.

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