

The following article “ASEAN: Losing Its Way?” by Trefor Moss first appeared on ‘The Diplomat website (<http://the-diplomat.com/2011/05/18/asean-losing-its-way/>) on 18 May 2011

Ambitious plans for an ASEAN Community look to be languishing. Regional nations playing politics with conflict aren’t helping.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations leaders must be wondering what possessed them, just two years ago, to set an ambitious new target for the establishment of the ASEAN Community and shift their timeframe from 2020 to 2015.

The ASEAN Community is meant to usher in a ‘culture of peace’ among member states through the formation of a ‘political-security community’ (one of three pillars, the others being economic and socio-cultural). There’s nothing wrong with the aspiration. But as leaders attending the ASEAN summit found in Jakarta last weekend, it’s hard to talk seriously about a culture of peace when two of your members are trading artillery fire and massing troops at the border.

As Thailand and Cambodia skirmish and risk going to war over what was originally a low-level dispute about the ownership of a temple, the vision of a united Southeast Asian political-security bloc becomes ever murkier. Thailand in particular has opted out of the community ideal in order to pursue a cynical policy of confrontation towards Cambodia, making ASEAN’s culture of peace the latest victim of the country’s toxic internal politics. ‘Thailand has definitely embarrassed and discredited ASEAN,’ says Pavin Chachavalpongpun, of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. ‘Both Thailand and Cambodia have damaged ASEAN’s reputation, but especially Thailand by insisting on bilateral talks and rejecting any kind of international approach.’

To its credit, Indonesia, ASEAN’s current chair and in many ways its driving force, did its utmost to impose the association’s collective will on the warring parties at the Jakarta summit. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s attempts to broker peace by forcing the Thai and Cambodian leaders to sit down together for talks met with predictable failure, but they represented a laudable departure from the old ‘ASEAN Way’, the organisation’s laissez-faire approach to the affairs of individual countries. What Yudhoyono did was to demonstrate

that when the behaviour of member states damages ASEAN's credibility, then the association will intervene. 'It was the first time the chair made a significant effort to engage in preventive diplomacy,' says Jurgen Haacke of the London School of Economics. 'For ASEAN that's a step in a positive direction.'

Yet this small victory can't distract from the larger setback, namely that two ASEAN members are engaged in a conflict that could yet intensify at a time when their regional umbrella group is meant to be consigning intra-regional conflict to the history books. Indonesian academic Rizal Sukma has written that the Thai-Cambodian conflict could eventually work in ASEAN's favour, as it will force the association to develop dispute-resolution mechanisms. He's also right to observe that the old ASEAN would once have bent over backwards to avoid openly addressing the problem, and that its refusal to stay silent in Jakarta was a welcome change from its traditional determination to see no evil.

The big question is whether ASEAN can develop dispute-resolution mechanisms with any real teeth. In future, will it have the resolve to force squabbling member states to accept peace-keepers or observers, such as the proposed Indonesian observer teams that Thailand—clinging to the old ASEAN Way—has so far refused to admit? Will it suspend members that fail to live up to the group's principles, as it has consistently failed to do in the case of Burma? Will ASEAN, in other words, break decisively from the ASEAN Way?

Of course, the establishment of a normative framework promoting ASEAN Community values would encourage member states to start respecting those norms. But the character of many Southeast Asian governments is such that they have limited room for adaptation. In ASEAN, democratic leaders are in the minority; more numerous are the heads of one-party states, absolute monarchs, and democrats only in name. The ASEAN Way of leaving your domestic baggage at the door of the regional forum has always suited them very nicely.

Thailand's recent actions are an example of how individual member states with undemocratic natures will, in times of internal difficulty, always be inclined to sacrifice the greater regional good to the interests of domestic expediency. Most analysts agree that the Thai-Cambodian conflict is largely an invention of the government in Bangkok and its royalist-military backers. This is the inverse of the peaceable community that ASEAN envisages in that Thailand has actively sought conflict with a fellow member. 'The (Thai)

government has avoided diplomatic means and tried to politicize the issue,' argues Pavin, who thinks that the army wants to take advantage of an external conflict in order to capitalise on the nationalist sentiments that wars tend to stir up.

He also believes that the royalist-military elite may decide to escalate the conflict and spark a much bigger war with Cambodia if elections in July go against its preferred candidate, current Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva. Any such an escalation would be a hammer blow to the hopes of forming a political-security community by 2015—especially since Cambodia is due to chair ASEAN next year.

Indonesia, ASEAN's intellectual dynamo, wants the group's political development to keep pace with its own. But Jakarta may have to accept that most of ASEAN's members aren't structurally prepared for that degree of change, no matter what pieces of paper they sign at association summits saying that they are. It's highly questionable whether several member states, not just Thailand, are truly capable of being part of a joined-up security community and of divorcing domestic concerns from regional actions. And as long as that's the case, the ASEAN Way will remain the only way in which ASEAN can function.