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# **ASEAN and the Principle of Non- Intervention – Practice and Prospects**

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## **About the Speaker**

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## **ASEAN and the Principle of Non-Intervention – Practice and Prospects\***

In a recent report on East Timor the British Broadcasting Corporation's regional analyst, Kate Liang, claimed that for many regional states intervention in this dispute sat "uneasily with the long-cherished Asian principle of non-interference in one another's affairs".<sup>1</sup>

There is, contrary to the BBC report, nothing particularly Asian about the principle of non-interference or, as it is also called, non-intervention. The principle is of Western origin, arising out of the Westphalia agreement in 1648, which laid the foundation for the European order of sovereign states. Non-intervention, sovereignty and the legal equality of states, have traditionally been regarded as the three basic rules specifying "the accepted and expected forms of behavior in relations between states".<sup>2</sup> They are at the centre of several United Nations doctrines, which were also largely prepared by Western nations.

It is true, of course, that the principle of non-intervention has subsequently found greater favour with newly independent countries, or countries such as China and Japan that came under varying degrees of Western influence during the colonial era. It is hardly surprising that those most recently deprived of sovereignty should be amongst the strongest supporters of the principle.

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What non-intervention has traditionally meant, is that “governments can attempt to influence each other’s behaviour only through established diplomatic channels”.<sup>3</sup> Governments cannot seek to expand influence by a direct appeal to citizens of another country, by occupation, or by using home territory as a base for opposing another regime. Non-intervention is not the same as non-involvement. Cooperation between governments for mutual interest in political, economic or social affairs — including such diverse areas as increasing military cooperation, trade arrangements, or seeking to limit narcotics trafficking — is not prohibited by this principle, even though such activities usually impinge on national sovereignty. Nor are states prohibited from opposing actions by a neighbouring country that have an adverse spillover effect, such as narcotics production, environmental pollution or the mass exodus of refugees.

There are recognised exceptions to this principle. It is subordinate to the issue of fundamental human rights where these have been clearly abused, as the broad international opposition to apartheid in the former South Africa demonstrated. And where international treaties apply, or the United Nations intervenes, the prohibition against intervention is greatly weakened. There always have been, of course, grey areas where the case for or against intervention is not clear cut. In practice also some aspects of this principle have been ignored in conflicts such as the Cold War, when both sides sought to appeal over the heads of governments to influence the other.

Such complexities and exceptions do not, however, detract from the importance of the basic principle. As K.J. Holsti observes, if non-intervention, sovereignty and the legal equality of states “were not observed with reasonable consistency, the structure of the system and the nature of interstate relations would change radically”.<sup>4</sup>

### **The ASEAN principle of non-intervention**

It is not difficult to understand why the principle of non-intervention was attractive to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) when it was established in 1967. Southeast Asia was then known as the Balkans of Asia, with good reason. The five founding members, all with the exception of Thailand independent for less than two decades, were divided by almost all kinds of differences conceivable — historical, racial, religious, cultural, political and economic. Some of the most obvious ethno-religious divisions were between Malay/Islamic Indonesia, Thai/Buddhist Thailand,

Chinese/Buddhist-Confucian Singapore, Malay/Christian Philippines and predominantly Malay/Islamic Malaysia. All were politically unstable, under varying degrees of siege from communist and ethnic opponents. All economies were fragile, particularly Indonesia's where annual per capita income of only US\$50 was less than a third that of other ASEAN partners. And all countries in the new organisation had bilateral difficulties with their neighbours. Indonesia had just wound up 'konfrontasi' with Singapore and Malaysia, Singapore had been forced to leave Malaysia, and Malaysia and the Philippines were locked in dispute over ownership of the northern Borneo state of Sabah. Under such circumstances ASEAN never could have survived if member countries had failed to adhere to the non-intervention principle with a reasonable degree of consistency.

ASEAN practice for the most part accorded with the traditional norms of non-intervention. First, government leaders generally refrained from open criticism of their neighbours, except for occasional pronouncements by senior figures such as Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad and during times of high bilateral tension. They erred on the side of caution when others government's actions arguably impinged on fundamental human rights. There were, for example, no open criticisms of military coups in Thailand, martial law in the Philippines, Indonesian actions in East Timor, or the use of detention without trial in Malaysia and Singapore. At the most, expressions of concern were conveyed privately.

Even critical commentary in the media was frequently followed by government apologies to the offended party — partly because of recognition that the mainstream media was generally closely linked to the government, but also reflecting a belief that if the media did anything to heighten tensions between countries governments should intervene to correct this. When Malaysian TV screened a CNN report showing graphic scenes of the 1991 Dili massacre in East Timor, Prime Minister Dr Mahathir sent his Information Minister to Jakarta as personal envoy to extend apologies. Such events have strengthened perceptions of ASEAN as a grouping that does not wash its dirty linen in public.

Secondly, ASEAN countries recognised the principle of not supporting neighbouring opposition movements, particularly when the opposition was "illegal". There were several occasions where this was ignored in practice — including such

well-known cases as Malaysian and Filipino support for opposing Muslim groups in Mindanao and Sabah, Malaysian support for Malay groups in southern Thailand and occasional Thai support for the Malayan Communist Party. Yet the principle was never disavowed, and certainly acted as an important restraint against support to insurgents escalating to intolerable levels.

The issue of providing encouragement and support to the legal opposition was more ambiguous and seldom put to the test. ASEAN countries do not seem to have objected to legal opposition movements visiting foreign countries in a bid to enhance their prestige — as government leaders do when they go on foreign tours. Visiting neighbouring countries was not a high priority, as these were not prestigious destinations. In the Malaysian case, however, Dr Mahathir as an opposition figure in 1971, and opposition political leaders from the Democratic Action Party and Parti Islam SeMalaysia in the 1980s, visited Australia and met officials there without government objection. Thai opposition leaders travel frequently overseas, and meet foreign leaders visiting Bangkok. Banharn Silipa-archa, for instance, visited Australia in 1995 in a calculated move to prepare for his ascent to the Thai leadership, without objection from the then Chuan Government. There is, of course, an international convention that political leaders visiting foreign countries do not use such occasions to attack political opponents at home, and any departure from this would doubtless have led to invocation of the non-intervention principle.

A third area in which ASEAN practiced a form of non-intervention, though it was never really identified as such, was in relation to economic and social cooperation. From the outset ASEAN drew up elaborate schemes for cooperation in these areas — including such diverse issues as trade, communications, education, the environment, and countering narcotics trafficking and other crimes — but concerns about preserving sovereignty prevented very much headway. For years plans for economic cooperation gathered dust as countries adhered to protectionist policies and refused to make concessions to neighbours.

ASEAN also evolved a number of practices, often referred to as the “ASEAN way”, which supported the non-intervention principle. Decision-making was strictly by consensus, providing reassurance to the weakest member that unwanted policies would not be imposed on it. To resolve any differences between members ASEAN relied less

on formal institutions and treaties than on close personal ties at official, ministerial and heads of government levels — often cemented on the golf course or at post meeting entertainment sessions. (One account, only half jokingly, puts ASEAN success down to golf, karaoke and durian.)<sup>5</sup> This facilitated the resolution of differences among the elite, reducing the need to resort to various forms of pressure for achieving national goals. As the ASEAN way strengthened ties between countries the *raison d'être* of non-intervention began to shift from a mechanism to contain divisions between members to a means of supporting fellow leaders.

However the picture should not be painted too starkly. ASEAN countries were aware from the outset that their sovereignty was intimately linked with developments in the region and beyond. The existence of global linkages is not a new discovery, even if the process has greatly intensified in the past decade. ASEAN's founding Declaration refers to the importance of economic and social cooperation in "an increasingly interdependent world", and these sentiments have been reiterated on numerous occasions since. The 1976 Declaration of ASEAN Concord notes that "The stability of each member state and that of the ASEAN region is an essential contribution to international peace and security". In addition, "The elimination of poverty, hunger, disease and illiteracy is a primary concern of member states. They shall therefore intensify cooperation in economic and social development..." Notwithstanding the shortfalls mentioned above, some progress was made. The launch of the ASEAN Free Trade Area in 1992 finally created an economic agreement that did involve the subordination of individual sovereignty to the collective good. Social cooperation has also been broad ranging, including areas such as education, narcotics, crime, environmental issues such as the smoke haze, and aid to the newer, poorer members of ASEAN. Contrary to many popular perceptions, the ASEAN doctrine of non-intervention, like its universal counterpart, has never meant non-involvement in the affairs of other countries.

There are at least a further six areas where ASEAN countries have 'intervened' in the internal affairs of others. First, ASEAN leaders have on a number of occasions lent support to one another. The decision of all ASEAN leaders to attend the Third Summit in the Philippines in 1987 at a time when security in Manila was uncertain, conveyed an unambiguous message of support for embattled President Aquino.

Several ASEAN leaders, including the Prime Ministers of Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore, called on Indonesia's President Soeharto in a gesture of solidarity during the final months of that administration. In November 1999 ASEAN leaders at an informal summit reiterated "their full respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Indonesia" and "their support for the efforts of President Wahid towards a peaceful settlement of the situation in Aceh".

Secondly, ASEAN leaders have often sought to mediate in conflicts between neighbouring states. Thailand, in the early years of ASEAN, frequently mediated between Malaysia and the Philippines in their conflict over Sabah. Indonesia took over this role from the 1970s. In late 1986 President Soeharto organised an official visit to Malaysia for the southern capital Johor Baru, then crossed the causeway to Singapore, in a gesture designed to ease conflict between these two countries after they had fallen out over the visit to Singapore by an Israeli President. Indonesia's chairmanship of a study group on the South China Sea — a conflict it is not directly involved in — was also aimed at containing intra as well as extra regional conflicts.

Thirdly, several ASEAN countries have given direct security assistance to neighbours. Indonesia provided aircraft to the Philippines for anti-insurgency operations in 1986. More importantly, Indonesia since the 1970s has facilitated negotiations with Muslim rebels, playing a major part in the 1996 Peace Agreement between Manila and the main insurgent organisation, the Moro National Islamic Front. Numerous bilateral security agreements exist, focused particularly on cooperation along borders. That between Thailand and Malaysia at one stage allowed not only hot pursuit into each other's territory, but also the stationing of Malaysian security forces inside Thailand. Military leaders in member countries have also regularly exchanged views on the suppression of insurgencies, and military establishments provided training to mid-ranking officers from other ASEAN countries. Indonesia in particular put much effort into organising 'national resilience' courses for its neighbours.

Fourthly, on a number of occasions ASEAN countries have taken up internal issues where these have involved important humanitarian or human rights issues. In the 1960s Malaysia led the campaign to expel South Africa from the Commonwealth because of its apartheid policy. The communiqués of ASEAN Ministerial Meetings have since the 1980s touched on human rights abuses in countries such as Palestine,

and more recently Bosnia. In February 1986, five foreign ministers (minus the Philippines) called for a “peaceful resolution” to the conflict between pro and anti-Marcos forces in Manila, noting: “A critical situation has emerged which portends bloodshed and civil war. The crisis can be resolved without widespread carnage and political turmoil. We call on all parties to restore national unity and solidarity so as to maintain national resilience.” More recently, before admitting Myanmar to ASEAN, foreign ministers agreed collectively to urge the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) to open a dialogue with pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi,<sup>6</sup> and ASEAN leaders individually made clear their commitment to improved observance of human rights. In subsequent months there was evidence of ASEAN continuing to pursue such issues. Philippine President Fidel Ramos requested but was denied contact with Aung San Suu Kyi during a state visit in October 1997, but Foreign Minister Domingo Siazon did have a meeting.<sup>7</sup> The Chuan government in Thailand, after coming to power in November 1997, expressed a strong commitment to engage Myanmar on human rights issues.

Fifthly, in accordance with traditional principles of non-intervention, ASEAN has viewed issues in a different light when the United Nations and/or international agreements are involved. The best illustration is in relation to Cambodia, where ASEAN worked through the UN to address problems associated with Vietnam’s occupation of that country at the end of 1978. The UN-brokered Paris Accords of 1991, which most ASEAN countries signed on to, provided a framework for the resolution of domestic difficulties in that country after Vietnam’s withdrawal. The Accords also provided a basis for ASEAN involvement in Cambodian affairs after Prime Minister Hun Sen’s power grab in July 1997. Even so, the ASEAN troika established to facilitate a resolution of these problems carefully ensured it had the prior approval of all Cambodian factions before getting involved.

Sixthly, ASEAN countries have not felt constrained to hold back if domestic issues in another country spill over adversely into their own. Thailand has never desisted from raising narcotics issues with Myanmar because this touches on internal Myanmar issues, as some have claimed. Similarly, in 1997 ASEAN countries were quick to register their concerns with Indonesia over the haze problem caused by

massive forest fires in Indonesia, leading to two public apologies from President Soeharto.

Two final points need to be made about the ASEAN non-intervention principle. The first is that an absence of open public statements should not be taken as an indication that all representations have been disavowed. The fact that representations to Indonesia on the haze issue were made privately or behind ASEAN doors led many analysts to the wrong conclusion that no protests were made. Private diplomacy was also used in other areas. Philippine Foreign Secretary Siazon has revealed that in 1992 Lee Kuan Yew phoned newly-elected President Ramos and advised: “you better fix your power shortage — seven, eight hours a day. No power, no good.” Such frank exchange, Siazon noted, “has been going on in ASEAN for many years”.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the principle does not mean that ASEAN adopts one standard for itself, and another for outsiders. If ASEAN leaders felt free to intervene in the affairs of non-ASEANs, they would have to accept the right of such countries to intervene in their own affairs — which obviously they do not. Membership does, however, come with the traditions of the ‘ASEAN way’, which as already noted are a powerful support to the practice of non-intervention.

### **Non-intervention in a more complex age**

The international order has undergone major changes in the past decade, in ways that have impinged considerably on the non-intervention doctrine. Following the Cold War foreign policy priorities have been redefined, with a new emphasis on issues such as human rights, the environment, and even the promotion of democracy. The United States has led the way, providing annual report cards on human rights practices in all major countries, and supporting greater UN focus on this issue through meetings such as the 1993 Vienna Conference, which reaffirmed the principle that domestic human rights issues were a legitimate concern of all nations. In focusing on such issues, and promoting democracy by means such as denying military assistance to countries where the military has seized power, the United States has pushed the envelope on traditional boundaries of non-intervention. The recent controversial US-led intervention in Kosovo has heightened international debate on such issues, and prompted the UN

Secretary-General to seek agreement on the need for more UN-led humanitarian interventions.

Globalisation has continued to gather momentum in a variety of different guises. Economic aspects have demonstrated the importance of closer cooperation between states, making the maintenance of sovereignty ever more difficult. The increasingly influential “market” sometimes makes demands on countries to adhere to prescribed norms in areas such as human rights, democracy and the environment — albeit in selective, irrational and sometimes herd-like ways. International organisations such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank increasingly intrude into such areas as ‘governance’ (sometimes defined as including democracy) and demand wide-ranging structural reforms. The ever expanding penetration of the international media, and the Internet, opens the whole world to scrutiny, and brings the values of dominant powers (particularly the United States) into all countries. A range of “non-conventional” security issues — including narcotics trafficking, illegal labour and refugee flows, AIDs, and money laundering — gain increased momentum, and constantly pressure states to increase inter-state cooperation.

Civil societies have also been strengthening in Southeast Asia. This is partly a result of globalisation, with local groups benefiting from linkages with international non governmental organisations (NGOs) and access to the Internet. In addition, rapid economic development, along with growing urbanisation and the expansion of education, has strengthened a variety of social groups and institutions such as a free press. Progress has advanced furthest in Thailand and the Philippines, but has also been important in Indonesia and Malaysia. These groups have put increasing pressure on governments to give greater priority to such areas as human rights, and to modify the traditional non-intervention principle.

ASEAN has thus found itself under pressure to modify its non-intervention principle from the international community, particularly countries in the West, the international media, and civil society in their own countries. They have been asked to play a more active role addressing issues of human rights and democracy in neighbouring countries, and to deepen cooperation on economic and environmental issues. This has come at a particularly difficult time for the organisation, as it moved from 1995 to absorb the CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam).

Expanding ASEAN focused attention on such issues for two reasons. First, the United States and European Union countries were then in the process of stepping up pressure on Myanmar in an attempt to secure concessions on issues of human rights and democracy. The United States even pressured ASEAN to delay Myanmar's admission, action that may in fact have strengthened ASEAN resolve to expedite Myanmar's membership. Secondly, the new members made it clear from the outset that an important reason for being attracted to ASEAN was precisely the doctrine of non-intervention, intensifying the organisation's introspection over how the doctrine might be applied.

As ASEAN moved towards expansion it also suffered a number of setbacks. On 5 July 1997 Second Prime Minister Hun Sen seized power in Phnom Penh. This postponed Cambodia's admission into ASEAN for nearly two years, and more importantly conveyed the impression that ASEAN was unable to ensure stability in its own region. ASEAN seemed helpless in the face of the regional economic crisis that followed the floating of the Thai baht on 2 July. Later in the year smoke from forest fires in Indonesia — most deliberately lit to clear areas for plantations — reached life-threatening levels in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, and parts of Thailand and the Philippines. Again the outside perception was that this represented a major failure of environmental management, not just for Indonesia but for ASEAN as a whole. By 1998 the economic crisis had political spillover with massive protests and riots culminating in the fall of Indonesian President Soeharto in May, and political tensions in Malaysia leading to the sacking of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in September. Soeharto was a founding leader of ASEAN in 1967, and had played an important stabilising role in the organisation. Political turmoil in Indonesia led to a United Nation's brokered referendum in East Timor, followed by Indonesian military atrocities when the Timorese voted for independence, events which again called ASEAN's relevance into question. Political unease also spilt over into acerbic bilateral disputes between ASEAN countries, particularly when some government leaders criticised Malaysia's handling of Anwar's ouster.

### **A modified ASEAN formula?**

The first attempt to reexamine the non-intervention doctrine in relation to these changes occurred when Anwar Ibrahim wrote an article for *Newsweek International* in July 1997 calling for a new policy of “constructive intervention”. This was widely seen as a novel proposal at the time, notwithstanding Anwar’s assertion that it did not violate the principle of non-intervention.<sup>9</sup> Certainly, four of the five proposals accorded with established practice. Suggestions for direct assistance to firm up electoral processes in new ASEAN members, increased support for legal and administrative reforms, developing human capital, and strengthening the rule of law did not threaten non-intervention. Just before Anwar’s views were published ASEAN foreign ministers agreed to offer assistance to Cambodia for its forthcoming elections.<sup>10</sup> ASEAN also channeled international aid it received into such areas, and individual countries such as Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia provided aid amounting to millions of dollars annually. The one possibly new proposal was that aid should be provided to strengthen civil societies in other countries. It is easy to see how such assistance might give rise to suspicions of intervention in internal affairs, and the inclusion of this proposal perhaps ensured a rather luke-warm ASEAN response.

Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan did, however, revive Anwar’s proposal in an address at Bangkok’s Thammasat University on 12 June 1998. The rapid spread of the economic crisis throughout the region, he argued, made it “time that ASEAN’s cherished principle of non-intervention is modified to allow ASEAN to play a constructive role in preventing or resolving domestic issues with regional implications”. Acknowledging that this was a sensitive issue, he proposed constructive intervention “in the form of peer pressure or friendly advice, when a matter of domestic concern poses a threat to regional stability”.<sup>11</sup> In a bid to make the concept more palatable prior to the Annual Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in late July, the concept was renamed “flexible engagement”. The idea was vigorously discussed at the AMM, but only the Philippines supported the initiative. As a compromise, ASEAN agreed to a new formula of “enhanced interaction”.

The controversy that Thailand’s initiative provoked was probably caused more by the suggestion that the principle was being modified, than the nature of the proposed

change per se. Other comments in Surin's Thammasat address make it clear that no major change was envisaged:<sup>12</sup>

We must remember that each country is the product of different circumstances, opportunities and constraints. Thailand has been at that stage before, when political repression was the order of the day. The advances we made towards greater democracy and human rights were paid for in tears and blood, here at Thammasat University. It is a process that each country must work out for itself, in its own way, at its own pace, in its own time.

Surin went even further in his opening address to the 1988 AMM. ASEAN, he argued, must "steadfastly adhere to the long-standing principles for which ASEAN has stood and which have truly served us well...The principle of non-intervention is not the issue..the real issue is how we can work together in dealing with the new challenges of a new millenium".

Twelve months later Thailand's position had not changed. In a long article to *The Nation* focused on relations with Myanmar, Deputy Foreign Minister MR Sukhumbhand Paribatra described the non-intervention principle as "the glue keeping ASEAN together". ASEAN, he argues, "cannot be the proactive promoter of changes in the existing political arrangement of any member country". In relation to Myanmar, therefore, Thai initiatives included dialogues on irregular migrations and human rights, encouragement of dialogue on national reconciliation between different political groups, and support for broader international initiatives such as those proposed by the UN.<sup>13</sup>

The issue has come up controversially in a number of areas since, particularly in relation to expressions of concern about the treatment of former Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Anwar, and political unrest in East Timor. Did the actions of some ASEAN countries conflict with the principle of non-involvement in these cases? Malaysia argued this was the case, as government actions against Anwar did not, in its eyes, give rise to humanitarian concerns of interest to the international community. This view was not accepted by many ASEAN countries, with Indonesia's then Foreign Minister, Ali Alatas, denying that such expressions of concern should be considered a violation of ASEAN traditions.<sup>14</sup> The Timor issue is an even clearer case, given that Indonesia approved UN involvement, and eventually requested the involvement of

ASEAN countries. Commentators, such as the BBC analyst mentioned at the outset of this paper, were mistaken in believing that there was a basis for declining involvement through invoking the non-intervention principle.

ASEAN countries have also addressed the issue in less direct ways.<sup>15</sup> On the economic front various efforts have been made to enhance cooperation since the economic crisis began, with some initial success but declining momentum as bilateral disputes and preoccupation over domestic political problems took their toll in 1998. One key area in which this has been seen to touch on the area of non-intervention is in relation to the proposal for peer surveillance of each other's macroeconomic policies. The first ASEAN Finance Ministers Meeting (AFMM) in March 1997 agreed on a greater exchange over macroeconomic policies, and an ASEAN plus meeting (including other members of APEC and international financial organisations) in Manila in November agreed to make this more systematic. A peer surveillance scheme was the centrepiece of the second AFMM in February 1998, and after protracted negotiations agreement was reached in October. The delay was caused by some states fearing that they might be required to reveal "national secrets", causing an impasse that was broken only by agreement that economic data would be submitted on a voluntary basis. This compromised the original idea, and whether it is practical remains to be seen. Finance officials have been noticeably quiet and non-transparent so far about how the scheme is working out.

ASEAN also sought to demonstrate commitment to cooperation on environmental matters. A flurry of meetings took place on the haze issue, after which the ASEAN Secretary-General declared confidence that the organisation was now well placed to contain further outbreaks.<sup>16</sup> ASEAN's 2020 Vision, adopted at the December 1997 informal summit, upholds the importance of "sustainable development" and "a clean and green ASEAN", and the First ASEAN State of the Environment Report was published in 1998.

Tentative steps were also taken on human rights issues. The 2020 Vision commits ASEAN to establishing "caring societies" in which "all people enjoy equitable access to opportunities for total human development regardless of gender, race, religion, language, or social and cultural background". It also proclaims ASEAN to be an "outward-looking" organisation and "an effective force for peace, justice and

moderation in the Asia-Pacific and in the world”. The July 1998 AMM welcomed the establishment of a non-governmental Working Group on an ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism.

ASEAN has continued to seek improved political cooperation, both as a group with third parties, and between member countries — several sharp bilateral exchanges notwithstanding. One of the most interesting initiatives was the decision at the 1998 Hanoi Summit to formulate draft rules of procedure for a High Council, as provided for in the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia. The Council was supposed to have been constituted in 1976, to assist in resolving or ameliorating any conflict between member countries, but has never been convened — probably because of concerns that it might conflict with the non-intervention principle. More recent initiatives to strengthen political cooperation include the holding of a ministerial ‘retreat’ at the AMM, inaugurated July 1999 in Singapore, and agreement in principle at the November 1999 informal summit to set up a permanent ministerial ‘troika’ to address issues of regional peace and stability.

The debate over non-intervention, and the various steps taken to enhance cooperation between ASEAN states in the areas enumerated above, do reflect an ASEAN willingness to address the principle (with varying degrees of success) and to modify it according to current needs. That has sometimes been obscured by the alarm that has followed any suggestion that the doctrine might be modified, and the vehemence with which some governments under political pressure have spoken out against alleged foreign interference. There has always been a need to balance the principle against the need to cooperate, and ASEAN has demonstrated flexibility in the past. There is an even greater need for flexibility in the current world of rampant globalisation. At a time when ASEAN’s image has been battered by economic crisis, the smoke haze and political unrest, it is particularly important that member states show willingness to subordinate sovereignty to the common good. ASEAN as a group stands a much better chance of making itself heard than any of the countries individually. ASEAN also benefits from continuing to demonstrate willingness to be proactive in areas such as the environment and human rights, so that the non-intervention principle is not perceived simply as a convenient device to protect the interests of autocrats.

At the same time the principle of non-intervention cannot be abandoned. It remains essential to ensure that smaller states are not brushed aside by big states, and is particularly important for ASEAN at a time when it has just expanded to take in former political rivals. The principle helped bring disparate states together when ASEAN started out thirty two years ago, and it can still play this role today.

## NOTES

1. From the BBC website — <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/asia-pacific/default.stm> – on 28 September 1999, published at 18:12 GMT.
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6. *The Nation*, 4 July 1997, quoting the Thai foreign minister Prachuab Chaiyasarn.
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12. *Ibid*, p. 5.
13. MR Sukhumbhand Paribatra, “Burma, Asean, democracy, dreams and realities”. *The Nation*, 16 July 1999.
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