

ISSN 0219-3213

2016 no. 14

Trends in  
Southeast Asia

LEARNING DIPLOMACY:  
CAMBODIA, LAOS, MYANMAR AND  
VIETNAM DIPLOMATS IN ASEAN

DEEPAK NAIR

**ISEAS** YUSOF ISHAK  
INSTITUTE

# Trends in Southeast Asia

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Published by: ISEAS Publishing  
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
Singapore 119614  
publish@iseas.edu.sg <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

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### **ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

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Nair, Deepak.

Learning Diplomacy : Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam  
Diplomats in ASEAN.

(Trends in Southeast Asia, 0219-3213 ; TRS 14/16)

1. ASEAN.
2. Cambodia—Foreign relations.
3. Laos—Foreign relations.
4. Myanmar—Foreign relations.
5. Vietnam—Foreign relations.
6. Southeast Asia—Foreign relations.

I. Title.

II. Series: Trends in Southeast Asia ; TRS 14/16.

DS501 I59T no. 14(2016)

October 2016

ISBN 978-981-47-6269-4 (soft cover)

ISBN 978-981-47-6270-0 (e-book, PDF)

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Typeset by Superskill Graphics Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Mainland Press Pte Ltd

# FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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# **Learning Diplomacy: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam Diplomats in ASEAN**

By Deepak Nair

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- For nearly two decades, ASEAN has served as a vehicle for the postsocialist states of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV) to seek diplomatic recognition and enmesh their economies with the dominant discourses, structures, and visions of post-Cold War capitalist modernity.
- In scholarly and lay understandings of how CLMV states “integrate” through ASEAN, attention has been firmly on the political, security, and economic outcomes of ASEAN-CLMV interactions, with diplomacy viewed as a passive instrument to pursue such outcomes. Such a static view of diplomacy, I argue, obscures a vital mechanism in and through which these broader macro-social changes are being sought and accomplished.
- As they pursue modernist state projects, diplomats too must yield to experiences of learning and redefinition to express (and enable) the project of international “integration”.
- This paper examines such processes of learning and redefinition by studying the effects and consequences of immersion in English-based ASEAN multilateral work for the diplomats of CLMV states.
- It delves into the Attachment Officers Programme for CLMV diplomats at the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta as an illustrative case to tease out the skills CLMV diplomats gain from their stints in ASEAN work. These skills — the ability to draft quasi-diplomatic documents in English, facility with speaking English, and an embodied ease in interacting with foreigners (both Asian and Euro-American) — are generic but also transposable as these junior



diplomats embark on representational and negotiating roles for their countries.

- The paper demonstrates how stints in ASEAN multilateral diplomacy have emerged as a channel for exposure and grooming for CLMV diplomats as they themselves “integrate” with an English-based global (yet Eurocentric) diplomacy.

# Learning Diplomacy: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam Diplomats in ASEAN

By Deepak Nair<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

For nearly two decades, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has served as a vehicle for the postsocialist states of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV) to seek diplomatic recognition and enmesh their economies with the dominant discourses, structures, and visions of post-Cold War capitalist modernity. Notwithstanding the ambivalent consequences of CLMV membership for ASEAN, existing studies suggest that the benefits of membership for these newer and poorer states have been starkly apparent: from gaining entry to a panoply of ASEAN driven diplomatic arrangements spanning the Asia-Pacific, and securing leverage in managing their involvements with the Great Powers,<sup>2</sup> to restructuring their regulatory and tariff regimes to accede to the WTO,<sup>3</sup> and, cumulatively, consolidating the bases of regime security.<sup>4</sup> In both scholarly and lay understandings of how CLMV states benefit from ASEAN, then, attention has been firmly on the political,

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<sup>2</sup> Emmers (2005).

<sup>3</sup> OECD (2013); Pomfret (2013); Fukase and Winters (2003).

<sup>4</sup> Bourdet (1997).

security and economic *outcomes* of these processes, with diplomacy viewed as a passive instrument to pursue these ends. Such a static view of diplomacy, I argue, obscures a vital mechanism in and through which these broader macro-social changes are being sought and accomplished.

Diplomats and their foreign ministries are not the only actors in the gamut of CLMV-ASEAN involvements and nor are they the final arbiters of foreign policy decision-making. That said, it is instructive to foreground diplomats and diplomacy in the context of ASEAN-CLMV interactions on two counts. First, ASEAN has historically been a prerogative of diplomats and the foreign ministry — from its early beginnings as an exclusively foreign ministry-led process,<sup>5</sup> to contemporary tussles in the age of expansive “community building” where an otherwise weaker foreign ministry wrestles with, if not asserts itself over, other powerful ministries (Defence, Finance) by keeping watch over the procedures and coordination of ASEAN activities.<sup>6</sup>

Second, and more importantly, it is worth emphasizing the irreducibly *diplomatic* quality of the varied interactions through which official “ASEAN” is produced. Be they diplomats from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), trade representatives and officials from various other ministries, or leaders at Summits, individuals performing the state must be sited around a meeting table with table-top flags, room flags, and country place cards; must advance “national positions”; and must learn — if not cope — with a putatively “ASEAN Way” of negotiation and decision making.

The elision of diplomacy, and the warrant to study it, leads me to suggest that the mechanisms facilitating the regional and global “integration” of CLMV states may also be located in the routine and

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<sup>5</sup> From 1967 until the first Summit in Bali in 1976 ASEAN was a foreign ministry-led process.

<sup>6</sup> This prerogative role has been institutionalized — with its share of contention and problems — in the ASEAN Charter which mandates the ASEAN Coordinating Council, often consisting of foreign ministers, to oversee and coordinate activities run by various other government agencies and ministries.

banal practices of diplomats circulating between their ministries and overseas postings. As they pursue high modernist state projects that aim to change and arguably transform their societies in visions of global modernity, diplomats too must yield to experiences of learning and redefinition in order to express and enable the project of “integration”.

In this paper I examine such processes of learning and redefinition by studying the effects and consequences of diplomatic immersion in ASEAN multilateral work for the diplomats of CLMV states. I do so by zooming in on a site of ASEAN diplomatic work par excellence: a thickening field of personnel and institutions doing round-the-year ASEAN activity in Jakarta, Indonesia. I argue that stints in ASEAN multilateral diplomacy, often sited in this emerging ASEAN diplomatic field in Jakarta, have emerged as a channel for exposure, training, and grooming for diplomats from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam as they themselves “integrate” with an English-based global (yet Eurocentric) diplomacy.<sup>7</sup>

Two caveats are in order. Given the limited span and scope of fieldwork (over two weeks, and centred on Jakarta as opposed to individual CLMV capitals), this study is a preliminary and narrow examination of what is a broader, multi-sited dynamic. Second, given the character of this publication, the aim here is to construct a descriptive account that may only implicitly address wider theoretical concerns — on change, socialization, and identity, in particular.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I will briefly sketch the historical contexts that have shaped the foreign services in CLMV states. The varied experiences of colonialism, post-independence state formation,

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<sup>7</sup> This Eurocentrism stems from the medieval Christian and Renaissance origins of the various institutions (diplomatic corps, permanent representation etc.), work practices (country note, the dispatch), as well as dispositions and modes of self-presentation (the lounge suit as the exemplar of a diplomat’s sartorial presentation, for instance) of contemporary inter-state diplomacy. On these points, see Neumann 2011 and 2012. Note, in addition, the aristocratic and bourgeoisie heritage of European inter-state diplomacy that was globalized over the twentieth century and has profoundly shaped the archetype of the diplomat in the postcolonial world.

and Cold War interventionism illuminate their trajectories of difference and divergence from distinctly “Western” English-based diplomacy. These historical contexts also inform the bases of their “weakness” as they embarked upon post-Cold War integration.

Second, I will examine the varied involvements of CLMV diplomats in ASEAN diplomatic work by examining the pattern of secondments, attachments, and professional assignments to the ASEAN Secretariat over the past two decades. I then trace the career trajectories of some of these diplomats with ASEAN experiences — often trajectories of elevation and advancement — to suggest that stints at the ASEAN Secretariat have served as a channel for diplomatic training and grooming for CLMV diplomats.

Third, and to explain why this may be the case, I focus on a flagship training programme for CLMV diplomats at the ASEAN Secretariat — the Attachment Officers programme — and examine the routine work practices and experiences that endow CLMV diplomats with valued and transposable skills that enable their “integration” with the circuitries of English-based international diplomacy, both within the ASEAN diplomatic world and beyond.

## **DIVERGENCE, ISOLATION, AND EMACIATION: POST-INDEPENDENCE TRAJECTORIES IN CLMV FOREIGN SERVICES**

As they embarked on their journeys of “integration” with ASEAN and the world, the foreign services in CLMV states — or approximations to such a foreign service — were widely perceived to be “weak” and in need of “capacity building”.<sup>8</sup> This notion of “weakness” requires

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<sup>8</sup> By “foreign services” I refer to the conventional understanding of a unified bureaucracy comprised of a diplomatic service, consular service, and the foreign ministry. The unification of these different elements into a foreign service in the Euro-American world took place in the early twentieth century (Neumann 2012, pp. 44–52), while in the decolonizing

careful consideration, however. “Weakness” often suggests the absence of coherent administration — a large and professionalized Ministry of Foreign Affairs — to administer diplomacy, as well as the absence of necessary endowments of linguistic and cultural capital among those entrusted with performing the state.

Conceptualizing “weakness”, however, requires an additional, relativizing qualification: the variance of prevailing bureaucratic forms and cultural-linguistic assets in CLMV foreign services to the dominant forms of administration and cultural-linguistic assets of post-Cold War international diplomacy. The “weakness” of CLMV foreign services, then, should not be conceived strictly as a lack or absence but also as a relation of *difference*: of the salience of patronage and elite capture in their foreign service bureaucracies over the avowed meritocracy of rational-legal administrations; the competence of their diplomats in Russian, French, and national languages over fluency in English; the possession of degrees from the erstwhile Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and India, over the United States and Western Europe; and in the fostering of different cosmopolitan experiences from having studied, lived, and worked in the Eastern bloc during the Cold War.

To understand weakness in terms of *absence* or lack, but also as something different from the dominant, requires situating the foreign services of the CLMV states in the historical contexts in which they took form.

### *Myanmar*

The contrast between a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ could not be more stark when one considers the foreign services in Myanmar — from its international stature as a champion of Asian solidarity in the 1950s to its subsequent status as a pariah state by the end of the twentieth

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world such bureaucratic elaboration took place only in the latter half of the twentieth century. Given the disruptive experiences to the growth of the foreign services in CLMV states (as I demonstrate in this section), and indeed the paucity of any systematic treatment about them in extant writings, I take “foreign services” in these states not in a literal sense but as approximations to the ideal form.

century. In the 1950s, Burma — as it was then called — enjoyed a high standing on the international stage practicing a diplomacy of “positive neutralism” that eschewed Cold War alliances, aired trenchant critiques of *both* Western and Soviet imperialism, energetically pursued Asian solidarity by organizing the Rangoon Asian Socialists Conference (1953) and the Bandung Conference (1955), and actively lent support to anti-colonial struggles in Asia and Africa. Even though the foreign service administration in Burma — as with most decolonizing states — was inchoate and driven by personalities, Burma succeeded in projecting an international presence through its highly educated civilian leadership — a band of leftist lawyers and intellectuals educated at Rangoon University knowledgeable in international affairs.<sup>9</sup> In pursuing neutrality, these leaders were supported by a range of highly educated functionaries, including former UN Secretary General U Thant who had been a personal assistant to U Nu. In little more than a decade, Burma’s pan-Asian solidarity pursued under the aegis of parliamentary democracy ended with the coup by General Ne Win in 1962. With the military (*Tatmadaw*) organizing state and society under a brand of military socialism, Burma’s internationalism quietened into indifference and, subsequently, a long inward withdrawal.

The effects of the military rule (under the various garbs of Ne Win’s Burma Socialist Programme Party [BSPP], the State Law and Order Restoration Council [SLORC] and the State Peace and Development Council [SPDC]) on the foreign services played out in three ways. First, the circulation of students, state functionaries, and diplomats to universities in Europe, America, India, and the Soviet Union in the 1950s ended decisively following the 1962 coup.<sup>10</sup> Second, the junta’s xenophobia coupled with ethnic Burman chauvinism was expressed — besides the violent expulsion of mercantile minorities — in the policy of Burmanization which elevated and consolidated Burmese language to the status of official national language. While the elevation of Burmese had been advanced by the preceding civilian leadership with English

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<sup>9</sup> Egretreau and Jagan (2013), p. 87.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117 (Brown and Ganguly 2003, pp. 153–61).

as a secondary language, the more aggressive policy of Burmanization inaugurated by Ne Win's Revolutionary Council threatened, if not displaced, ethnic minority languages in the Frontiers and rendered English as a "minor foreign language".<sup>11</sup> Third, with the military in charge of foreign policy, soldiers and military officers — from Lt-Colonels to Brigadier Generals — filled the ranks of the foreign services as military attachés as well as Ambassadors.<sup>12</sup> Field diplomats (now soldiers) predominantly engaged in intelligence gathering,<sup>13</sup> while the traditional task of representation and negotiation was left to career service personnel who served as deputies in overseas missions.<sup>14</sup>

### *Cambodia*

The history of the foreign services in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam can be traced to the shared legacies of French Indochina — a colonial geopolitical construct in which distinct Khmer, Lao, and Vietnamese nationalisms were fostered and boundaried over the twentieth century; colonial and subsequently Cold War geopolitical interests were anchored to post-independence state formation,<sup>15</sup> and where enduring patterns of Vietnamese influence were generated and resisted in the course of the regions' political and social history.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Brown and Ganguly (2003), pp. 153–61.

<sup>12</sup> Egretreau and Jagan (2013), p. 138.

<sup>13</sup> Selth (2002).

<sup>14</sup> Occasionally, the military's penetration of the foreign services would be touched up by appointing a career diplomat as foreign minister, most notably U Ohn Gyaw under whom Myanmar became a member of ASEAN in 1997. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.

<sup>15</sup> With France, America, the Soviet Union, and China playing intricate roles in the form and outcome of struggles between royalist (Norodom Sihanouk, Bao Dai, Souvanna Phouma) and communist (Cambodian Communist Party, Viet Minh, and Pathet Lao) alternatives.

<sup>16</sup> From the colonial circulation of Annamese and Tonkinese functionaries to the postcolonial leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party in the region.



The concoction of Khmer nationalism invented in an Orientalist French imagination,<sup>17</sup> colonial and Cold War realpolitik, and destructive postcolonial social engineering had profoundly crippling effects on the form and strength of the foreign service in Cambodia. Like Myanmar, Cambodia practiced a skillful policy of neutrality in the early years of the Cold War, but unlike Myanmar where this policy was expounded by a band of leftist intellectuals, Cambodia's diplomacy was prosecuted and embodied in the person of Prince Norodom Sihanouk. The Prince's extensive lobbying in Western capitals paved the way for Cambodia's formal independence from the French in 1951 (besides thwarting any incipient republicanism at home), while his tightrope on neutrality in the 1950s and 1960s lasted until his ouster by a U.S.-backed coup in 1970.<sup>18</sup>

Railing against the coup from Beijing, Sihanouk sided with his former communist enemies the Khmer Rouge who took over Phnom Penh in December 1975. With the Khmer Rouge unleashing a dystopian, genocidal revolution over the next three years, the structure of personnel and institutions under Sihanouk's royalist absolutism would disappear with devastating speed and consequences. In his classic study of the Pol Pot regime, Ben Kiernan documents the fate of numerous overseas educated returnees as well as diplomats who were swiftly corralled into political education classes, sent off to work in the fields, and, in some case, disappeared.<sup>19</sup> Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea (DK) also spelled a phase of dramatic isolation — the only air link to Phnom Penh was a weekly flight from Beijing, while the DK maintained embassies in only three states by 1977.

Anti-Vietnamese hysteria and border strife initiated by the DK leadership<sup>20</sup> triggered Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1979, ushering an even more protracted era of diplomatic isolation for the Hanoi-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea (PKR) regime. Recovery from the

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<sup>17</sup> Barnett (1990).

<sup>18</sup> Leifer (1967).

<sup>19</sup> Keirman (1996), pp. 147–56.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 361–66.

wholesale destruction from the DK years was arduous, but the foreign service slowly revived with the happenstance of a 26-year-old Hun Sen — a DK defector with a leading role in the Hanoi-backed onslaught and subsequent regime — appointed as the country's (and the world's) youngest foreign minister.

Sebastian Strangio notes how the shrewd and non-ideological foreign minister gathered young overseas-educated intellectuals and technocrats with some proficiency in French or English to serve in the depleted foreign ministry.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, these recruits would emerge as a close circle of trusted aides accompanying Hun Sen through his meteoric rise in Cambodian politics. The emergence of a two-party government led by Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and the royalist Funcinpec following the UN-supervised elections of 1993 brought another injection of French-speaking and overseas-educated figures (allied to the Funcinpec) into the circuitries of foreign policy-making and practice. These French educated royalists were, however, marginalized following the 1997 coup when Hun Sen took over as the sole leader of the state.

The debilitations from past experiences, and the contemporary structure of one-party dominance sustained by patronage colour the form and character of the foreign services in Cambodia. Diplomats are often members of the ruling Cambodian People's Party; party interests are often conflated with national interests; and party loyalty serves as an index for preferment and advancement.

### *Vietnam and Laos*

The foreign services in Vietnam and Laos have escaped the crippling depletions experienced in Myanmar and Cambodia. Nonetheless, their trajectories bear analogous marks of colonial legacies, Cold War intervention, and post-colonial socialist engineering that inform their weakness and difference in the post-Cold War diplomatic context.

As one of Southeast Asia's oldest, most sophisticated, and battle-hardened communist movements that captured the core zones of French

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<sup>21</sup> Strangio (2014), p. 35.

Indochina following successes in the First and the Second Indochina Wars, the Vietnamese communist party was instrumental in steering the communist shift in Indochina in the 1970s.<sup>22</sup> Vietnam's leadership in "socialist Indochina" — sought yet disliked and resisted — operated along various personal and institutional channels: from the "suave" Vietnamese ambassador Ngo Dien schooling the young Hun Sen in international affairs,<sup>23</sup> to the long-standing party-to-party, government-to-government and even family ties between the communist ruling elites in Laos and Vietnam.<sup>24</sup> The machinery of Vietnamese leadership thus included a number of diplomats — often party functionaries schooled in Marxism-Leninism and educated in Hanoi, the Soviet Union, and India — who exercised an important influence over their counterparts in Laos and post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia.

Communist rule in Vietnam and its close ally Laos has been described by similar experiences and consequences: the consolidation of enduring one-party rule, eager cooperativization of agriculture followed by withdrawal, the displacement of French in education and language policies, and — with notable effects for the foreign service — the large flight of educated old elites and their displacement by new ones (especially in Laos where nearly 90 per cent of trained and educated Laotians left the country within a decade of communist rule).<sup>25</sup>

The relative strength and self-assuredness of the Vietnamese foreign service would be tested as the party-state initiated the project of opening up under the twin forces of domestic economic duress and "new thinking" in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. As they embarked on a "multi-directional foreign policy" and sought membership to regional and international institutions in the early 1990s, Vietnamese diplomats were unprepared and out of sync with the linguistic, cultural, and institutional

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<sup>22</sup> By aiding the Lao People's Revolutionary Party's ascendancy to power in Laos and the Khmer Rouge's takeover of Cambodia in 1975.

<sup>23</sup> Strangio (2014), pp. 29–30.

<sup>24</sup> Stuart-Fox (1996), p. 274. Also see, Goscha (2004).

<sup>25</sup> Stuart-Fox (1996), p. 246.

demands of English-based multilateral diplomacy. This was expressed acutely on the eve of their membership to ASEAN where English would not only be the official working language of diplomatic work, but would have to be relied upon *entirely* for striking relationships and rapport (in contrast to diplomats from island Southeast Asia forging relations and even invoking notions of kinship in a shared Malay idiom).<sup>26</sup>

In a detailed study of Vietnam's membership to ASEAN in 1995, Nguyen Vu Tung described the challenge of English language proficiency among Vietnam's diplomats and officials, noting that as many as 300 officials took short intensive English courses in Vietnam and overseas in the build up to ASEAN membership.<sup>27</sup> The problem of low English "capacity" would persist, however. Two years after entry into the Association, Vietnam's newly established ASEAN National Secretariat observed in a forthright report:

Our participation in this type of cooperation remained passive and reactive. When attending ASEAN conferences and meetings, our officials for the most of the time sat quietly and failed to participate in the discussions. We failed to put forth new ideas, initiatives, and projects for the promotion of cooperation. The reasons for this include our limited knowledge and understanding of ASEAN and its cooperation, our officials' lack of knowledge and skills to work in multilateral settings ... Above all, however, fluency in English still remains a major problem.<sup>28</sup>

In sum, the histories of the four CLMV states illuminate the life-worlds and life chances of their diplomats as they initiated their distinct projects of international "integration". In each of these cases, the foreign services were subject to the depredations of colonial and Cold War conflict, emerged as extensions of dominant parties or a junta, were restructured

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<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Ba (2009), pp. 120–21.

<sup>27</sup> Nguyen Vu Tung (2007), p. 56.

<sup>28</sup> Cited in Nguyen Vu Tung (2007), p. 60.

and refilled with new military or party elites with these partisan affiliations constituting an index for preferment, and were drained of colonial Western (British, French or American) linguistic and cultural capital in favour of national (Burmese) or international socialist (Russian, Vietnamese) currencies of linguistic, cultural, and social affiliation and attachment.<sup>29</sup>

## **“OPENING UP” TO THE WORLD WITH ASEAN: CLMV CIRCULATIONS THROUGH JAKARTA**

For each of the CLMV states, the project of integrating with international economic and diplomatic institutions has been marked by their prefatory and preparatory stint with ASEAN. The view of ASEAN as a stepping stone for international integration was held expressly by political leaderships in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia as they became members of the Association in the mid- to late-1990s. This was not the case with Myanmar where membership to the Association was initially perceived by the junta as a shield from the geopolitics of the post-Cold War period (a buffer against Chinese influence and also the pressures of liberal internationalism). Only since 2011, with the ongoing civilianization of the regime, has ASEAN become an explicit vehicle for Myanmar’s

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<sup>29</sup> This draining was never quite complete, however. Several older generation Vietnamese party leaders were educated in French colonial schools and were conversant in French. This held for Laos as well with the Pathet Lao’s early leadership consisting of blue blood, French educated communists serving as negotiators and spokespersons while power was wielded by leaders of more “proletarian” backgrounds who had fought alongside the Vietnamese in anti-French guerilla campaigns (Stuart-Fox 1996, pp. 73–75). Another channel for alternative linguistic and cultural socialization in the later decades (post-1975) came with university degrees and postings in India. Numerous diplomats from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos would report honing their English language skills during their years in India (See, Thakur and Thayer 1991, p. 252; also, author interviews).

enmeshment with the international economy and for diplomatic engagement, most vigorously during Myanmar's Chairmanship of ASEAN in 2014.

ASEAN appeals as a stepping-stone for two reasons. First, with predominantly English-speaking and often Western-educated diplomats from its five founding members (and since 1984, Brunei), ASEAN's diplomatic platform approximates closely to a post-Cold War mainstream — a legacy of having sided firmly with the Western geopolitical and economic order during the Cold War. Second, instead of being overwhelmed within larger international organizations, ASEAN offers a shielded and manageable framework with its small membership and its trademark agnosticism towards members' regimes and their domestic politics.<sup>30</sup>

As functionaries from CLMV states sought membership to ASEAN and got down to the business of learning its systems, procedures, and protocols, they travelled to Jakarta, and specifically, to the ASEAN Secretariat. Established in 1976, the ASEAN Secretariat is the principal body of regional bureaucrats coordinating and recording the expanding array of interactions — formal and informal meetings, retreats, and workshops — through which official ASEAN activity is produced. As a repository of institutional memory on ASEAN's working practices, protocols, and past decisions, the Secretariat has been frequently called upon by CLMV states to initiate their functionaries into the business of ASEAN diplomatic and bureaucratic work — from “expeditionary” CLMV delegations to the Secretariat on the eve of ASEAN membership in the 1990s to more recent delegations from CLMV states preparing for their Chairmanship of ASEAN.

Other than serving as an important stop in the itineraries of visiting CLMV delegations, the Secretariat has also emerged as a *node* through

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<sup>30</sup> This mainstream is expressed in the status of English as ASEAN's “official working language” (Article 34 in the ASEAN Charter), in how diplomats from the ASEAN-6 states were often schooled in British and American universities, and in their economies' longstanding openness to international capital.

which numerous CLMV diplomats have converged and coursed through over the past two decades. Three distinct channels of circulation may be identified. First, *secondments* from CLMV states to the office of ASEAN Deputy Secretary-General (DSG), serving a minimum of three years at the ASEAN Secretariat.<sup>31</sup> Second, diplomats from CLMV states who take leave without pay from their foreign ministries and work at the ASEAN Secretariat as *regular professional staff*— as Senior Officers or Assistant Directors for anywhere between three to eight years before returning to their ministries. Third — and numerically more significant — are CLMV diplomats sent on *attachments* to the ASEAN Secretariat for ad hoc orientations lasting a month or as part of a structured “Attachment Officers Programme” lasting between six months to one year before returning to the ASEAN Departments in their MFAs.

While the above three channels circulate diplomats from the ASEAN Departments of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs in Hanoi, Vientiane, Phnom Penh, and Nay Pyi Taw to the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta, a *fourth* channel of CLMV involvement in ASEAN diplomatic work in Jakarta has emerged with the opening of permanent diplomatic missions from all ASEAN member states (including CLMV states) since 2009. Each of these missions has a resident Permanent Representative to ASEAN supported by a body of diplomats (Deputy Permanent Representatives followed by First, Second, Third Secretaries and attachés). Working collectively as the Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR),<sup>32</sup> these resident diplomats work on a full-time basis with the ASEAN Secretariat as well as the resident ambassadors and diplomats from ASEAN’s ten Dialogue Partners — a band of

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<sup>31</sup> The number of DSGs at the ASEAN Secretariat has increased from one in 1993 to two in 1997 to four following the 2008 ASEAN Charter. Since 2008, each ASEAN Community pillar at the Secretariat is headed by a DSG (thus, three DSGs for three Departments) while a fourth DSG oversees the “corporate and community affairs” department at the Secretariat.

<sup>32</sup> More precisely, the 10 Permanent Representatives (PRs) form the CPR while supporting diplomats comprise the “CPR Working Group”.

Great and Middle powers including the United States, China, Japan, India, Australia, South Korea, EU, Canada, Russia and New Zealand. These missions of CLMV states have become a new stop between the ASEAN Secretariat and the ASEAN Department at the MFA, with some Attachment Officers trained at the Secretariat returning to the ASEAN Department in the Foreign Ministry and subsequently assigned to Permanent Missions in Jakarta.

In sum, for nearly two decades, CLMV diplomats have been assigned to the ASEAN Secretariat in the various garbs of secondments, regular staff, and attachments. Tracing the career trajectories of CLMV diplomats *subsequent* to their stints at the ASEAN Secretariat raises some striking patterns.<sup>33</sup>

Those seconded to the Secretariat as DSGs from CLMV states invariably hailed from senior backgrounds and, upon completing their three-year terms, returned to their positions or were elevated in rank and postings. Three such instances are worth noting. Laos' SOM (Senior Official Meeting) leader was appointed as DSG in Jakarta between 2009 and 2012, and, after his term at the Secretariat, was posted to London as Laos' ambassador to the United Kingdom. Vietnam's Chief Negotiator for accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) was appointed as DSG in Jakarta from 2000 to 2003 and returned to his position as Deputy Minister for Trade in Vietnam. Meanwhile, Cambodia's former Director-General (DG) of the ASEAN Department was appointed as DSG from 2006 to 2009 and, following her three-year term, has been elevated to Cambodia's SOM leader for ASEAN and Secretary of State (of vice-minister rank) in Cambodia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The pace of career advancement has been swift in the case of junior or mid-career diplomats who worked at the ASEAN Secretariat as regular staff (taking leave without pay from their ministries). The experience of two such officers from Laos who worked at the Secretariat during the 2000s is especially illustrative. Following their stints as Senior Officers and Assistant Directors at the Secretariat, these officers were appointed as Directors-General (or Deputy DGs) in the Laos MFA. Subsequently,

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<sup>33</sup> Data compiled by author.



they were posted overseas with one appointed as Laos' Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York and the other as Laos' Permanent Representative to the United Nations and other International Organisations in Geneva.

Diplomats seconded to the Secretariat as DSGs, and those sent to work at the Secretariat as regular staff, are numerically fewer compared to the body of CLMV diplomats who have been sent on "attachment" to the ASEAN Secretariat since 1997. The first set of attachments from CLMV to the ASEAN Secretariat was in 1997 when nearly twelve to fifteen diplomats from Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar (excluding Vietnam, which had already joined ASEAN in 1995) were funded by the UNDP to spend a month at the ASEAN Secretariat to learn about ASEAN work procedures and raise "capacity" in their newly established ASEAN Departments in the MFAs.<sup>34</sup>

This one-off attachment for mid-career and senior diplomats from CLMV states was followed in 2002 with a structured "Attachment Officers" programme funded by the Japan Initiative for ASEAN Integration (JAIF). Designed exclusively for CLMV junior diplomats, the Attachment Officers programme funds one diplomat from each CLMV MFA to work at the Secretariat as an attachment officer for six months, and from 2006 onwards, for one year. There have been thirteen batches of Attachment Officers so far.<sup>35</sup>

Following their training as Attachment Officers, several CLMV diplomats have moved on to notable positions, often within the space of a

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<sup>34</sup> Thanks to Moe Thuzar for clarifying the distinction between these one-off attachments and the structured AO programme. Interview, Singapore, 6 May 2016.

<sup>35</sup> In 2013, and as a reflection of its perceived utility, the programme was expanded from four to twelve attachment officers. The additional eight officers are drawn from ministries other than the MFA and are assigned to the "Social Cultural" and "Economic Community" departments at the Secretariat. The focus in this paper, however, is on the four diplomats assigned to the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC) department.

decade. Myanmar's current Ambassador to the United States (previously SOM Leader and Permanent Secretary in the Foreign Ministry), Myanmar's current Permanent Representative to ASEAN in Jakarta (and former ambassador to Indonesia), the Director-General for International Organizations at the MFA, and Myanmar's current ambassadors to South Africa and Norway, were all attachment officers early in their careers. More recent Attachment Officers serve as Deputy Directors-General in the Myanmar MFA, and as Deputy Heads of the Permanent Mission in Geneva and in the Myanmar embassy in Malaysia.

Cambodia's current Ambassador to Germany as well as its Ambassador to Indonesia (concurrently Permanent Representative to ASEAN) were Attachment Officers for six months at the ASEAN Secretariat in the early 2000s. Other Cambodian alumni from the Attachment Officers (AO) programme currently serve as Deputy Directors and Bureau Chiefs of the ASEAN Department in the Cambodian MFA, while some are posted overseas as First Secretaries (in Indonesia, Japan) and as Second Secretary (in Luxembourg).

Two senior Vietnamese officers on brief attachments to the Secretariat in the early 1990s went on to serve as Directors-General of the ASEAN Department, as Ambassador to Indonesia, and as Permanent Representative in Geneva. Younger Vietnamese officers part of the subsequent Attachment Officer programme have served as first secretaries in embassies in Thailand, Singapore and Ukraine. Meanwhile, Laotian diplomats who trained as Attachment Officers at the Secretariat have gone on to become Laos' Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva (separate from the other two regular staff members noted above), and as first secretaries in Laos' embassies to the United States and Japan. Other Attachment Officers have gone on to senior posts within the foreign ministry as Deputy Director-General (DDG) of the ASEAN Department, Director of the ASEAN Economic Cooperation Division, as well as Director of a division in the Ministry of Industry and Commerce.

This exercise of correlating the career trajectories of these CLMV diplomats with a commonly shared index of advancement (i.e. appointments as Ambassadors and Counsellors, appointments to major Western metropolises and neighbouring capitals, and as SOMs, DGs or

DDGs in the foreign ministry) suggests that a certain *value* is being generated from immersion in ASEAN multilateral work that is facilitating (if only partly) these elevations and concomitant circulations in service of international “integration”.

Indeed, it is worth triangulating these correlations with the perceptions and shared understandings of CLMV diplomats who, in the absence of any iron-clad yardsticks to evaluate their peers, would refer first and foremost to this pattern of elevation and circulation and the preceding experience of ASEAN attachments as a necessary — if not sufficient — cause to explain successful careers in the MFA.

To tease out this *value* produced through ASEAN immersion that appears to generate assets transposable for a career in international diplomacy at large, I shall zoom in on one such channel of ASEAN immersion — the Attachment Officers programme at the ASEAN Secretariat since 2002.

## **DIPLOMATIC GROOMING: THE ATTACHMENT OFFICERS PROGRAMME AT THE ASEAN SECRETARIAT<sup>36</sup>**

The scheme for an Attachment Officer’s programme at the ASEAN Secretariat in 2002 had an unintended origin. Following their entry to ASEAN, foreign ministers from the CLMV states made an express request that their nationals have preferential entry to the ASEAN Secretariat via secondments.<sup>37</sup> They feared that candidates from CLMV states with poor

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<sup>36</sup> The material that follows is based on two weeks of fieldwork during May 2016 in Jakarta. I conducted nineteen semi-structured interviews with a mix of interlocutors including former Attachment Officers, diplomats in CLMV Permanent Missions to ASEAN in Jakarta, Secretariat staff from CLMV countries, former Secretariat staff with an in-depth knowledge of CLMV attachments, and Dialogue Partner diplomats and development consultants based in Jakarta.

<sup>37</sup> Severino (2006), p. 21.

“human resource capacity” (specifically, a poor command of English) would be disadvantaged in the competitive process of “open recruitment” by which professionals from more advanced ASEAN-6 states were hired. This, however, created a conundrum for the Secretariat’s management which was under pressure to ensure equitable national representation among staff at the Secretariat but were concerned with the consequences of such formal and informal secondments for the quality of work within the Secretariat as well as for the avowed merit-based recruitment process within the organization.<sup>38</sup> Liaising with Japan — ASEAN’s long-standing “Dialogue Partner” — a proposal for an Attachment Officer’s programme was worked out so that diplomats from CLMV states could come to the ASEAN Secretariat on an annual basis for a fixed period and swiftly return to their foreign ministries.<sup>39</sup>

In its early years, the Attachment Officers programme (henceforth, the AO programme) was a channel for sending mid-career CLMV diplomats, with most poised for senior managerial roles within the relatively new ASEAN Departments in their MFA. These diplomats bore the fresh scars of the distinct trajectories of isolation and emaciation I noted in section two. A six-month Attachment Officer in 2002, the current Cambodian Permanent Representative to ASEAN (and concurrently Ambassador to Indonesia) is a survivor of the brutal Khmer Rouge years<sup>40</sup> and, as one analyst observes, belongs to a generation of diplomats who learned English from scratch “through self study at a pagoda, temple or a street class”.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, the current Permanent Representative of Myanmar to ASEAN — who came for a short one-month attachment to the Secretariat

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with former Secretariat staff, Jakarta, 9 May 2016.

<sup>39</sup> The Attachment Officers programme is run by the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) division of the ASEAN Secretariat.

<sup>40</sup> The Ambassador’s story was profiled by the BBC in 2010. See, “Cambodia Voices”, *BBC News*, 23 July 2010 <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-10743057>>.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with a foreign policy researcher on Cambodia, 4 May 2016.

in 1997 — had been raised in the context of language and education policy under Burmanization and had honed his English skills mostly through on-the-job learning.

In contrast to the mid-career Attachment Officers of early 2000s with varying degrees of formal education (often from national and socialist bloc universities), the profile of AO officers has become progressively younger over the years. Further, more recent batches express the post-liberalization boom in their states with their degrees in linguistics, law, English language, and international relations from a mix of national, East Asian (Japan, Korea), and Western universities.

Selection for the AO programme has been a long-standing point of contention. The opportunity to spend a year overseas on a generous U.S. dollar package coupled with nepotism within CLMV foreign ministries has at times coloured the character of nominations to this scheme. For several years, it was left to each foreign ministry to nominate one attachment officer — invariably from the ASEAN Department or Southeast Asia Division — with no screening from the Secretariat or the funding Dialogue Partner. The problems arising from this arrangement have been recognized by some CLMV diplomats too. Describing the Attachment Officers programme as “very good”, a CLMV Permanent Representative to ASEAN in Jakarta described “favouritism” as its “dark side”. While “bright officials” do get selected, there are “weak” ones too who have little proficiency in English or suffer from “mentality issues”, specifically, a lack of initiative to learn from the experience.<sup>42</sup> In recent years, the selection process has been changed with the introduction of an explicit selection criteria — that candidates must be between 25 to 35 years of age, have minimum two years experience in the MFA, demonstrate proficiency in English, and possess basic IT skills. Nominees from each CLMV state must satisfy these criteria by passing tests and writing open-ended essays conducted over email by the ASEAN Secretariat.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Interview with a CLMV Permanent Representative to ASEAN, Jakarta, 13 May 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with diplomat from Japan Mission to ASEAN, Jakarta, 13 May 2016.

Once they arrive in Jakarta, Attachment Officers spend up to a week in orientation consisting of briefings by HR and IT officers, and visits to the Secretariat's library storing a trail of past decisions and documents. Housing in Jakarta has presented a perennial concern for attachment officers given their lack of knowledge of Bahasa Indonesia and steep rentals for executive housing in Kebayoran Baru. It may take a month or more before AOs find accommodation in executive hostels (*kos kosan*) at walking distance from the Secretariat, enter into flat shares with other officers in high-end executive housing and, at times, live with officials from their home embassies as well.

Following orientation, AOs are handed over to specific divisions in the ASEAN Political Security Community Department. This Department consists of an External Relations Division (liaising with Dialogue Partners on behalf of ASEAN) and a Political Security Division that services all internal ASEAN meetings of foreign ministers, ASEAN SOM meetings, CPR meetings in Jakarta, and meetings of sectoral bodies ranging from defence to immigration and transnational crime, among others.

The AO programme is, for the most part, an exercise in on-the-job training. Once they join their assigned divisions, AOs are expected to support ASEAN Secretariat staff as they go about "servicing" member states and meetings. As a full-time regional bureaucracy, the ASEAN Secretariat operates as a repository of information and institutional memory, and AO officers support the Secretariat by "collecting information, consolidating information, and preparing documents."<sup>44</sup>

As they embark on this role, AOs must grapple with the ambiguity of their position within the Secretariat's hierarchy. Located between Senior Officers (paid in U.S. dollars) and Technical Officers (mostly Indonesian staff remunerated in Indonesian rupiah), the junior diplomat/Attachment Officer may have to navigate varying levels of authority. Instances where older AOs were reluctant to take orders from younger Senior Officers and/or hived off work assignments to Indonesian TOs have caused strained relations in the past. Noting this challenge, a former

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with former Attachment Officer, Jakarta 12 May 2016.

AO cautions that “if you think you are between the two [positions] then you are in a trap”. He continues:

Six months is too short for someone who wants to try out new things and too long for someone who doesn't. So one has to take initiative. If the Technical Assistant's job is to collect information, the [higher ranked] Technical Officers role is to classify information, and a Senior Officer's role is to write the documents, then the Attachment Officer is an executive who should be able to do all these things.<sup>45</sup>

Besides collecting information and writing papers, AOs are encouraged by Secretariat staff to attend and observe ASEAN meetings in Jakarta. They are also expected to travel overseas with Secretariat teams on official “missions” to “service” at least three ASEAN meetings (this travel component is also funded by Japan).

Halfway through the year, AOs have a mid-term review at the Secretariat, and they may have the opportunity to switch to a new division (with the agreement of “sending” and “receiving” divisions in the Secretariat). As the year draws to an end, AOs travel to Japan for a “field visit” in Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto to meet with officials from Japan's MFA, JICA (Japan's main development agency) and other Japanese bodies. Finally, upon the completion of their term in Jakarta, a “graduation ceremony” is held at the Secretariat with Permanent Representatives from one or two CLMV states and the Japanese Ambassador to ASEAN in attendance.

What do AOs learn from the experience of working in ASEAN multilateral work? While not exhaustive, I shall list some of the skills that this experience appears to impart to diplomats from CLMV states.

### *Drafting Documents*

ASEAN's diplomacy — and indeed any diplomatic practice — is structured around the routine and predictable production of documents.

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<sup>45</sup> Interview with former Attachment Officer, Jakarta, 25 April 2016.

The significance of documents should not be understated: a two-page “Agenda” prefigures the tempo and sequence of interaction in a meeting to come, while a four-page “Summary of Discussions” memorializes a diplomatic interaction and embalms it for future disinterment. Indeed, and as recent experience with ASEAN’s joint communiqués amply demonstrate, the content and protocol governing a document can often end up as central points of contention and struggle. Competence in diplomacy thus involves an appreciation of textual productions — from mastering their diverse forms to recognizing their delicate uses.

As the only body coordinating the expanding web of ASEAN meetings and interactions, the ASEAN Secretariat is tasked with generating a range of information papers, non-papers, and first drafts that are then perused and modified by diplomats in CPR, SOM, Ministerial and various sectoral body meetings. For most AOs, one of the first tasks at the Secretariat involves preparing a document — starting with simple texts like “talking points” (for a meeting with a VIP delegation to the Secretariat) or a “note to file” (a summary of such a meeting). With time, AOs are given more complex writing tasks such as a “meeting report” for an ASEAN meeting they attended, drafting a longer and exacting “information paper” that offers an in-depth study of an issue for consideration before member states at a meeting, or, at times, even a first draft of a “legal document like a ToR” (terms of reference).<sup>46</sup> As they go through this process, a sequence of work techniques is learned and imbibed: looking up old documents from the library; reading documents like reports, Chairman’s statements, and communiqués for decisions and dates; searching the Internet via approved search engines to gather facts and figures or to cross-check claims by member states. One AO recalls his experience,

On the first day I joined, the ADR asked me to prepare talking points for a delegation visiting from Canada. I went back, did some research and came up with a few talking points ... We

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with a senior Secretariat staff from CLMV country in ASEAN Secretariat, Jakarta, 17 May 2016.



could learn a lot by reading, because we have access to all the old documents in the library ... Good thing about ASEAN Secretariat is that you have access to documents and reports, so you can learn the issue very fast. Then there are certain techniques you can learn such as report writing, how to prepare documents ... these are simple technical issues but they are important for young officers like us.<sup>47</sup>

As they move on to preparing more elaborate documents like meeting reports and summary of discussions, AOs encounter the more complex business of exercising judgement and handling ambiguities. This layer of complexity is in part because most AOs are used to writing reports in Vietnamese, Khmer, Lao and in Burmese back in their foreign ministries.<sup>48</sup> A staff member at the Secretariat notes,

Some of them don't have exposure at all how to write reports in English and additionally how ASEAN reports are written ... For us [openly recruited staff from ASEAN-6 countries] we know ... even if there is a little bit of effort it is in trying to fit the format ... for them it's a *real challenge* ... the use of words, the difference between "adopted" and "endorsed", for instance. Some of the words may be new to them.<sup>49</sup>

An added complexity arises from the novelty of grasping the sensibilities of ASEAN diplomatic work. Noting the aversion in ASEAN meeting reports to singling out countries that make specific proposals or naming (and shaming) member countries that agree or disagree on specific issues, AOs learn to "exercise judgement". A former AO recalls,

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with a former AO, Jakarta, 17 May 2016.

<sup>48</sup> There is some variation within this, however. As one AO notes, while most reports and "position papers" in the ministry are written in national languages, some AOs may have experience in preparing talking points for their DGs in English in preparation for an ASEAN meeting.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Secretariat staff, Jakarta, 16 May 2016.

When it is not so sensitive we mention the name of the country. If the country has a very specific proposal or paper then we will mention the country ... But when they have different views, we won't. We will reflect all the points, all the pros and cons, but not mention the name. This is really something you learn on the job.<sup>50</sup>

The above is one instance of a broader challenge: of knowing how to deal with ambiguity in texts. A staff from the Secretariat with many years of experience in dealing with AOs, notes,

Managing ambiguity, that is the difficult part. When to attribute a decision to the whole meeting, even if it was spoken by just one country? When was a decision actually made? Or how to differentiate digressions from the actual agenda at hand, things like that. For them it's a big thing, just learning that would take them places.<sup>51</sup>

### *Speaking English*

Learning to speak English as a medium of casual and official interaction is one of the most salient benefits of working in ASEAN multilateral work. To be sure, the level of English proficiency has risen over the years with successive AO batches. This is in part because of the expansion of university education offering degrees in English, law, and international affairs, but also because of a certain self-selection whereby children from diplomat and elite family backgrounds secure greater access to educational and cultural assets and enjoy a swift route to the foreign ministry.

That said, it is important to distinguish between the acquisition of academic English and its practical use. Recalling his time at the Secretariat surrounded by English-speaking staff from Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines, one AO officer puts this sharply “you can be good in English

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<sup>50</sup> Interview with former AO, Jakarta, 16 May 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with former Secretariat staff, Jakarta, 17 May 2016.

in university, but when you come to do this work [in Jakarta] you will be *lost in a jungle!*<sup>52</sup>

AOs cope in different ways with the attendant experience of isolation and alienation from working in an English-speaking workspace — some may withdraw into their circle of national peers while others push themselves to raise their proficiency. A propensity for the latter, however, is built into the character of working at the Secretariat and in multilateral work in general. For one, AOs are urged by Secretariat staff to “attend ASEAN meetings, observe how member states negotiate their positions, how they argue their positions”, all in English. Furthermore, they are pressed to interact frequently with English speakers — from secretariat staff to foreign diplomats in Jakarta — in contrast to the more sheltered options available to them by working in their ministry at home or in an embassy handling bilateral relations.

There is an added imperative to learn and speak English, as one CLMV Permanent Representative to ASEAN (and former AO) elucidates. Making a distinction between English as a “simple language” for everyday interactions and English as a “language for official communication”, he notes how experience in ASEAN work opens a window to understand a range of technical categories and acronyms in English that structure official discussions on maritime security, international law, and development cooperation. Patiently understanding this terminology — starting with their early ASEAN-related experiences — matters when they take on negotiating roles later in their careers.

At meetings, one country wants to reflect their position. If we don't know [the language being used] then we might let it pass. We miss it! Their position becomes the agreed position. When we understand what happened it will be too late.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with former AO, Jakarta, 25 April 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with CLMV Permanent Representative to ASEAN, Jakarta, 17 May 2016.

### *Interpersonal Skills*

While fluency in English and the ability to write diplomatic documents constitute important benefits of working in the APSC Department of the Secretariat, AOs and seasoned CLMV ambassadors are quick to point to the significance of something more intangible yet crucial to the prospect of becoming a successful diplomat — the confidence to manage decidedly “international” relationships.

Again, acquiring such skill becomes imperative upon entering the workspace of the ASEAN Secretariat housing professionals from all ten ASEAN member states. Quite apart from the culture shock of arriving in the heady urbanism of Jakarta, AOs work towards being legible (in accents, clothing, and demeanour) to their counterparts in the Secretariat, as well as the foreign development consultants and diplomats they come into contact with in the city. Misunderstandings and alienation are an unsurprising aspect of their initiation into this decidedly multinational world. A former Vietnamese AO recalls

Vietnamese people, they can be quite straightforward. When I came here, I learned that responding to many things requires certain subtlety. One can't say things with [directness] ... many things we learn here are not necessarily related to work but about how to improve our interpersonal skills.<sup>54</sup>

Another AO recalls how the experience at the Secretariat was profoundly about building “personal relationships” in a space described by “international working methodologies” and where local elite affiliations held little purchase for making connections. Building personal relationships was both an expression and outcome of greater confidence as AOs could come into their own by mingling with Southeast Asian staff but also Western development consultants based at the Secretariat. A former AO recalls:

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<sup>54</sup> Interview with former AO, Jakarta, 16 May 2016.

When I came to Secretariat I didn't have a lot of experience interacting with foreigners, like daily conversations and also professionally. Now that we are here, we are expected to interact and discuss everything in English ... so what I learned a lot was about interacting with people and seeing how they respond to situations.<sup>55</sup>

On the importance of such interpersonal skills, a European diplomat in Jakarta notes that

You can be grammatically accurate in your reports and speech, but you will still find it difficult to communicate. So while it is important [English skills], *communication* skills and reading body language is even more important.<sup>56</sup>

The skill of relating to others has some tangible benefits. A CLMV Permanent Representative observes that the AO programme offers junior CLMV diplomats the opportunity to build networks that make them useful for the ministry back home. In his words,

A capable attachment officer will make networks ... networks with ASEAN states but also with Dialogue Partners. Exchange views, exchange visiting cards, make friends. If AO is good in socializing, is good in knowing how to approach donor agency, with project writing and proposals, then it becomes very useful for the ministry to have that person.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Interview with former AO, Jakarta 12 May 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with a European diplomat, Jakarta, 12 May 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with a CLMV Permanent Representative, Jakarta, 13 May 2016.

## CONCLUSION

These skills learned on the job working at the ASEAN Secretariat — writing documents in English in the prose and conventions of diplomacy, growing facility with spoken English, and an embodied ease in interacting with foreigners — are amplified once neophytes from the Attachment Officers programme become practicing diplomats for their countries.

As noted earlier, the AO programme has emerged as a feeder route for staffing the ASEAN Department at the MFA as well as the Permanent Missions from CLMV states that have opened in Jakarta since 2009. As they circulate out to attend numerous ASEAN sectoral body meetings, support ministerial meetings and summits, and engage with diplomats from Dialogue Partner countries professionally and socially, these CLMV diplomats deepen their taken-for-granted practical knowledge of how to engage in the idiom of English-based multilateral diplomacy. The once scripted and contrived turns into second nature.

I have delved into the AO programme as an *illustrative case* of the effects and consequences for CLMV diplomats when they engage in ASEAN diplomatic work. To be sure, such skills are also learned through other bilateral and multilateral channels, for instance, from assignments to prestigious embassies in the Euro-American world and neighbouring states to stints at Permanent Missions to the UN in New York and Geneva.

That said, it is worth emphasizing the distinctiveness of the platform that ASEAN affords to CLMV diplomats. First, as the trajectories of former AOs and seconded offers from CLMV states who went on to high-profile UN postings indicate, ASEAN exposure has often served as a *stepping stone* for CLMV diplomats to engage with international multilateral work. Second, it is worth noting the *density* and *frequency* of ASEAN multilateral interactions which offer greater opportunities for recurrent travels and face-to-face interactions for CLMV diplomats posted in ASEAN departments and Permanent Missions compared to those in bilateral assignments and the smaller cohort posted in multilateral missions in the industrialized West. Third, ASEAN multilateral diplomacy is a platform to acquire concentrated knowledge not only of Southeast Asia but also of the geopolitical interests and stakes of Great and Major powers affiliated as ASEAN's Dialogue Partners. Such knowledge —

of sensibilities, foreign policies, and operational mechanisms such as “plan of actions”, declarations, and communiqués between ASEAN and the Great Powers — is often expressed in the kind of *conversations* that diplomats involved in the circuitries of ASEAN work are perceived to carry off. One analyst notes how those with ASEAN backgrounds can “talk big” and are knowledgeable of the “games” of Asian security.<sup>58</sup> No surprise, then, that in certain CLMV states, the ASEAN departments are among the largest departments within the foreign ministry, and are also drawn upon as “human resource” to staff and lead other divisions in the foreign ministry.<sup>59</sup>

In this paper I have sought to demonstrate that diplomacy and diplomats are not passive instruments to broker the wider changes sought by their regimes, but are also interpreters, bearers, and facilitators of such change. Knowledge of the mores of global English-based diplomacy, as well as the ability to practice it with some competence, *matters* if those performing the state (like diplomats) aspire to negotiate their projects of international integration on fair and informed terms, if they intend to project favourable impressions of a new national self-image before domestic and international audiences, and if they plan to knowledgeably navigate the intricacies of their ongoing outreach to the world.

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with a CLMV foreign affairs analyst, Singapore, 4 May, 2016.

<sup>59</sup> This is especially the case in Cambodia and Myanmar.

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TRS14/16s

ISBN 978-981-4762-69-4



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