The Military and ASEAN's Principle of Non-Interference

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Abstract

ASEAN's principle of non-interference is perhaps one of its most controversial aspects. While it is seen as essential for ASEAN, especially by constructivists, to allow the creation of a shared norm and a common regional identity, detractors note its detrimental effects that hamper further regional integration and prevent ASEAN from effectively dealing with human rights abuses in its member states. This article argues that ASEAN's principle of non-interference is essentially a byproduct of the military's influence in the politics of some of the members of ASEAN, shaping ASEAN's identity – and, in turn, its fixation on the principle of non-interference. Essentially, it could be argued that for members of ASEAN, despite its flaws, the principle of self-interference is working as intended.

Keywords*: ASEAN, Military, Non-interference, Regional Integration, History of ASEAN*

Prinsip non-interferensi ASEAN mungkin adalah salah satu aspek yang paling kontroversial. Meskipun prinsip ini dianggap penting untuk ASEAN, terutama oleh kaum konstruktivis, untuk memungkinkan terciptanya norma kebersamaan dan terbentuknya identitas Asia Tenggara, para pengkritik menyorot dampak negatifnya yang menghambat integrasi regional lebih lanjut dan mencegah ASEAN dalam menghadapi pelanggaran hak asasi manusia secara efektif di negara-negara anggotanya. Artikel memiliki argumen bahwa prinsip non-interferensi ASEAN pada dasarnya adalah hasil dari pengaruh militer dalam politik beberapa anggota ASEAN, yang membentuk identitas ASEAN – dan pada gilirannya, fokusnya pada prinsip non-interferensi. Pada dasarnya, dapat dikatakan bahwa bagi anggota ASEAN, meskipun memiliki kelemahan, prinsip non-interferensi bekerja sesuai dengan tujuannya.

Kata-kata Kunci*: ASEAN, Militer, Non-intervensi, Integrasi Regional, Sejarah ASEAN*

The principle of non-interference is one of the core foundations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and perhaps its most controversial aspect. Many argue that the principle is, in fact, essential, as it allows the creation of a shared norm and a common regional identity that underpins ASEAN regionalism (Acharya 2001; Yukawa 2017). This, in turn, allows for ASEAN's most important contribution, that it has managed to reduce tensions among its member states such that the region has largely been peaceful for decades, even though ASEAN was formed just a few months after the official end of *Konfrontasi,* the low-intensity conflict waged by Indonesia against Malaysia and Singapore (Wanandi 2012). At the same time, since the end of the Cold War, the principle has already been openly questioned in light of grave human rights abuses by its member states (Ramcharan 2000). More egregiously, in recent years, ASEAN's inaction over the persecution of Muslim minorities in Myanmar (Suresh 2019; Morada 2021), followed by its inability to deal with the aftermath of the Myanmar coup (Robinson 2023), led to further questioning on the principle of non-interference as it hinders the effectiveness of ASEAN itself.

Furthermore, this causes ASEAN to lack institutional strength, unlike its European counterpart, the European Union (EU). Politically and militarily, the relationship between members of ASEAN is also quite distant. ASEAN is characterized by intra-bloc rivalries and disputes. Tensions and sometimes outright violence between ASEAN nations—including Indonesia and Malaysia, Malaysia and Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, and Cambodia and Thailand—have sprung up throughout history because of various border, territorial, political, ethnic and religious factors, especially over the last 50 years. In fact, except for Cambodia and Laos, all Southeast Asian states have outstanding territorial disputes with Malaysia (Caballero-Anthony 2005). Plus, there are the thorny South China Sea disputes, of which ASEAN members Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Brunei—and China, of course—have overlapping claims, and a settlement is nowhere in sight. The principle of non-interference limits ASEAN's ability to influence its members' policymaking, preventing ASEAN from implementing legally binding decisions to its members, thus becoming a major obstacle for ASEAN to

gain more institutional strength and to integrate the region further economically and politically (Berkofsky 2005).

All of this has helped create an environment in Southeast Asia where nationalism is ever-present and grounded in the fabric of domestic and regional politics, as historical legacies and rivalries constantly hang in the background of regional relationships. The prominent role that nationalism plays in Southeast Asia is reinforced as ASEAN politicians and bureaucrats often make appeals to ethnicity, religion, and state sovereignty to bolster their support, and local citizens are acutely sensitive to perceived slights by neighboring rival countries. Great power politics—particularly the contemporary rivalry between the US and China for regional dominance—also raises the chance that ASEAN could get pulled apart and polarized, fractured into competing sides. Both China and the US have invested considerable time, effort, and resources to woo ASEAN countries to their side—and, failing that, to support the policy positions of Washington and Beijing. This great game of politics between China and the US has played out on several issues—the biggest of which is the status of various claims to the South China Sea.

This by itself has been a source of irritation to ASEAN. Even more troubling is that China has aggressively asserted its sovereignty over the South China Sea over the last decade. China has employed hostile tools against ASEAN members Vietnam and the Philippines in the waters, ramming their ships and spraying them with water cannons. Furthermore, China has built islands from scratch in the South China Sea and has constructed airstrips, military facilities, and lighthouses. To further protect its assets and consolidate control, there are constant rumors that China will announce an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the South China Sea. China's moves in the South China Sea have bedeviled ASEAN. ASEAN has refused to call out China by name as a violator of regional rules and norms. Disagreements over China's actions have plagued ASEAN summits, including the one in 2012, in which, for the first time, ASEAN members were unable to issue a concluding meeting statement. And of course, China's ambitions, claims, and activism in the SCS have divided the bloc into three camps: the claimant countries that oppose China and seek US diplomatic and security support (Vietnam, the Philippines); ASEAN nations that

are willing to do China's bidding (Cambodia); and the rest of the bloc—some are confused, some seek to play a mediator role, and others prefer to stay clear of the regional ruckus.

As another example, take a look at the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD), commonly known as the Quad, comprised of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States; and the newly created AUKUS, comprised of Australia, the United Kingdoms, and the United States. Viewed narrowly, both are security arrangements that are designed to anticipate growing threats from China. But in a broader sense, both do a lot more, especially from the perspective of US officials. To them, if played just right, it is a possible prelude to closer, deeper, more widespread cooperation not only among the members and the US but also could attract more Asian nations. After all, they come right at a time in which India, Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, other Asian nations, and the US themselves are fortifying their defenses in the region and in the process of strengthening their security ties to each other.

Combined, nationalism, intra-ASEAN rivalries, and the role of external great powers have fractured ASEAN in more or less ways. This fracturing has not completely destabilized ASEAN: the organization still exists and functions on a daily basis. However, in a bloc in which consensus is the modus operandi, fractures, and divisions within ASEAN constantly loom large. Indeed, arguably, the bloc punches under its collective weight. To many observers, such as Robert Kelly, ASEAN has turned into a talking workshop, in which the bulk of what ASEAN does is hold meetings and workshops, rather than get things done (Kelly 2009). Relatedly, these internal divisions with ASEAN have exposed the need for greater leadership from within to override—via coercion inducements, or persuasion—the extant political and policy differences.

The literature on inter-state alliances, such as Stephen Walt's *The Origins of Alliances,* posits the argument that states will balance against threats, that it is the perception of threat that drives states to ally with each other as a way to deal with the most menacing actor in the international system (Walt 1987). Given this argument, it should be expected that Southeast Asian states would have created an alliance bloc, not unlike their European counterpart's

NATO, to balance against the omnipresent threat from China. Yet bilateral arrangements and approaches remain the norm of military cooperation within ASEAN, rather than multilateral arrangements, and political cooperation is still very loose and ad hoc (Roberts 2010).

Therein lies the puzzle of this paper: Why has it been so difficult for Southeast Asian countries to craft tight political and military ties as well as a common policy on those issue domains? Furthermore, why has the process of regional integration overall, which includes tight and durable economic cooperation, moved so slowly and in fits and spurts? To answer these questions, we believe there is a crucial missing piece in the literature--the role of ASEAN militaries, especially on how the military played a role in the formation and later the expansion of ASEAN. To answer these questions, it is important to understand the relationship between ASEAN and Indonesia, the biggest and most important state in ASEAN, especially Indonesia's military, at the beginning of its formation. As noted by the then Singaporean Prime Minister, Lee Kwan Yew in his memoir, the role of Indonesia was crucial for the success of ASEAN, and thanks to its self-restraining from acting like a hegemon, Indonesia was accepted by other members of ASEAN as the first among equals (Lee 2014).

Military and Politics in Southeast Asia

This article begins with the simple point that some Southeast Asian nations have failed to get their militaries out of politics, no matter what their political regimes look and operate like, and these militaries have had a general expectation that they should play a pivotal role in state politics and policymaking. These militaries have retained the position of internal power brokers within states. As expected, this position of political dominance has impacted how Southeast Asian nations look and act internally and engage with states regionally and internationally. But it has also bled into how these countries view and support ASEAN. After all, keep in mind that ASEAN operates under the rule of consensus, so that any single nation then naturally wields veto power; as a result, then, politically dominant Southeast Asian militaries have influence over

ASEAN resolutions. However, this begs a few questions: So why have ASEAN militaries cared about regional integration? What has motivated them to shape the speed, intensity and direction of ASEAN cooperation? At the bottom, why have Southeast Asian militaries decided to exercise their power, taking advantage of their informal and formal political position, on ASEAN issues?

Just consider Indonesia. The Indonesian military has relinquished a formal political role, and the country has fairly successfully transitioned to democracy over the last 26 years, holding multiple free and fair national elections. Still, the Indonesian military is, rightly or wrongly, a formidable political player, even arguably more critical than extant civilian institutions. The population considers the Indonesian military as very trustworthy. A survey done in June 2023 by *Indikator*, a well-regarded survey institute, found that the military is trusted by 95.8% of the population, even slightly above the President at 92.8%, and way above the Lower Chamber of the Parliament (DPR) at 68.5% (Aditya & Carina, 2023). In addition, President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, to the chagrin of many analysts, had relied too much on the military to the detriment of Indonesian democratic stability (Power 2018). Furthermore, because a significant part of the population holds the military in high regard, many retired officers have played major roles in both regional and national elections, as both candidates and supporters. For instance, the 2014, 2019, and 2024 Presidential Elections saw Prabowo Subianto, a retired general, as one of the presidential candidates, who finally won the 2024 presidential election, while Jokowi was publicly supported by Luhut Binsar Panjaitan, also a retired military general.

It is routine for post-New Order Indonesian civilian governments to include former military men in their cabinets. Even the so-called fresh-face and outsider, Jokowi, tapped the aforementioned Luhut Panjaitan as the Coordinating Minister of Politics, Law, and Security and another retired general, Ryamizard Ryacudu, as the minister of defense—a post that the civilians occupied during Megawati Sukarnoputri and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono Administrations. In fact, it is often argued that Jokowi has used the military to buttress his rule, giving it an extra form of legitimacy, especially in his disputes against both the opposition and elements within his own party (Tarigan 2015). In addition, Jokowi could simply order

the military to work on national development programs, bypassing the civilian bureaucracy and its red tape. In recent years, many academics have bemoaned and are alarmed regarding growing involvement of military personnel in civilian affairs, arguing that Indonesia has again turned authoritarian (Power 2018; Power & Warburton 2020)

> In the case of Thailand, the Thai military considers itself the defender of the crown and the people and thus has reserved the right to intervene and restore 'order' whenever it perceives any threat to the monarchy—or, in reality, its dominance over the state (Chachavalpongpun 2011). When civilian governments overstep the boundaries set by the military, the Thai military steps in, removing sitting governments and thrusting themselves into power. The military's ability to interfere at will in the political process is a routine cycle of Thai politics and is often blessed, at least by the Thai political and economic elites (Farrelly 2013; Peel 2015). After the Thai 2023 General Election that resulted in the anti-establishment Move Forward Party winning the most seats and thus was expected to be able to form the government, the military-picked senators simply blocked the party from forming the next government (Maresca 2023) and the party in the end was banned and dissolved (Sullivan 2024).

The cases above indicate that the Southeast Asian militaries have retained an important, at times essential, role in Southeast Asian politics. This power allows them the capacity to do a host of things, such as acting on domestic and foreign affairs. Of course, domestic politics is a primary concern of theirs. However, international and regional politics also matter to them for various reasons. ASEAN militaries have sought to maintain the sovereignty of their countries. This partly stems from a fear of foreign nations' influence over where, when, and how they can exercise their power in the world. To them, it is almost distasteful even to broach this idea.

Today, while there are attempts to increase familiarity with each other, notably through bilateral military arrangements, a regular

exchange of officers, and joint military exercises, it is very noticeable that such military exchanges are never through the ASEAN so as to avoid possible disagreements over who would command the forces (Anwar 1994). There is not much movement toward a non-aggression pact or a regional military force; neither does any momentum to integrate Southeast Asian force structures, doctrine, and tactics. In the absence of these things, ASEAN militaries have individually, not collectively, defined their own interests as well as the security requirements their home countries need and face.

Two Views of ASEAN Integration

The story of integration within ASEAN is typically told in two disparate ways. First, we have the optimists. This narrative is best represented by the work of Amitav Acharya, who sees ASEAN as a community of Southeast Asian nations that increasingly share ideas and interests and gradually self-identify with each other (Acharya 2012). Put simply, there is now a collective Southeast Asian identity, which is the product of interactions between Southeast Asian nations, history, and culture. This shared identity has produced a shared worldview among ASEAN members who deeply value state sovereignty, non-interference from external actors, economic expansion, tolerance of diversity, and respect from the world's major players.

Unfortunately, the social constructivist account is not particularly convincing. Put simply, there is little evidence that this interpretation of ASEAN is grounded in reality. Acharya's account is laced with hope and aspiration, which is fine, but it does not capture what ASEAN has been and what it is currently all about. Recent problems have shown ASEAN's lack of unity when its members are facing external threats. Take a look at what happens in the territorial dispute in the South China Sea, where ASEAN countries disagree on the China threat, with the Philippines ending up getting more and more frustrated with ASEAN and moving closer to the United States as a way to balance China (Heydarian 2024).

The second account, told by pragmatists, provides an insight that's better grounded in the realities of today's ASEAN. Now, when

we refer to "pragmatists," we're referring to those scholars who attempt to view Southeast Asia as it is, realistically. These folks do believe ASEAN has achieved significant progress, but this progress has been haphazard and sluggish (Kurlantzick 2012). The pragmatists see ASEAN as a complicated regional body filled with members of different shapes and sizes. The group's members are relative motley crew of nations. Just consider that ASEAN consists of members that are more or less authoritarian (Brunei, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos), ruled by the military (Thailand), semi-democratic (Myanmar, Singapore and Malaysia) and democratic (the Philippines and Indonesia). This means the bloc is not particularly cohesive. In part because of their varied political systems, ASEAN countries have different interests and self-identities, all of which bleeds into policy. In this kind of environment, it is hard for ASEAN collectively to agree on matters and get deals done, and when they are sealed, they are usually reactive in nature and scope (Nelson 2013).

Overall, the pragmatist arguments about ASEAN integration have a much stronger argument that the bloc has come a long way, but the picture is not as rosy as the optimists suggest. Internal divisions are a fact of life and have stymied bloc cohesion and limited how much the organization can actionably do to solve the region's major problems and issues. At the same time, the "black box" of the state needs to be further investigated, notably on how internal state processes, interest groups and bureaucracies impact ASEAN integration. And that, in a broad sense, is what this project is all about getting inside the state to look at how micro events and actors impact integration with Southeast Asia. This is an important consideration, for far too much of the ASEAN literature has been concerned about the forest while overlooking the trees.

It is for that reason; it makes the most sense to explore first and foremost the political power and motives of the military—rather than sitting governments or economic agents. This research project really has not been considered by scholars, in part because much of the literature on ASEAN depicts the state as a western-oriented unitary actor. In such a world, militaries do not capture or have a hold on the state. They are not power brokers, and they do not possess veto power over what sitting governments deliberate or decide to do. Sure, western militaries do wield influence within

states—they want higher budgets, have a constituency, and push, at times successfully, their policy agendas forward. But western militaries do not act as the ultimate arbiter over state affairs.

In the developing world in general, and throughout the history of Southeast Asia more specifically, this has not been the case. In unstable states with shaky governments, militaries are able to carve out an indispensable role in politics and the policymaking process. Vulnerable governments are in constant need of protection and defense against real or perceived internal adversaries, and state militaries are best equipped to do so. These governments are placed in a position in which they must bargain with the state military, though the military is in the cat-bird seat to extract concessions. Governments believe they must accede to the wishes and demands of the military-political power, control over policies, higher defense budgets, and so on—to ensure their continued grip on political power.

By opening up the possibility that militaries profoundly impact their state's participation in institutions and willingness to pursue integrationist policies, we can better understand the growth and strength of regional institutions in parts of the developing world. This article discusses in detail the case of ASEAN, from its early days to its expansion in the 1990s, noting how ASEAN militaries have for years slowed and distorted, in various ways, the process of regional integration where the military played a role in preventing ASEAN from taking a more interventionist approach. Later, this article will point out how the expansion of the ASEAN in 1990s happened because the military did not use its position to block the expansion.

The Formation of ASEAN

The formation of ASEAN and its later expansion have been strongly influenced by the threat perception of each ASEAN member, especially from its military players. In fact, the Indonesian military's involvement in regional cooperation started even before the formation of ASEAN itself. In a 1964 Indonesian SESKOAD's (Army Command School) publication, the SESKOAD officers emphasized the development of a regional grouping to

counter what they perceived as a threat from the north, notably China (Anwar 1995), even though at that time, Indonesia, under President Sukarno, was actually building a close relationship with China based on their mutual interests on the fragmentation of Malaysia (Simon 1969).

The military's view of China was not an aberration in Indonesian politics. According to Weinstein, two-thirds of Indonesian foreign policy elites saw China as a serious threat through its political and financial backing of the Indonesian Communist Party. In addition, several leaders from the navy and Islamic politicians claimed that Indonesia was vulnerable from invasion from Hainan Island and Communist-controlled Vietnam. One Indonesian admiral spoke ominously of Chinese human waves, overwhelming Indonesian defenders, a "Genghis Khan with an atom bomb." (Weinstein 1976)

The Indonesian military saw China and its Indonesian proxy, the Indonesian Communist Party, as the biggest threat to Indonesian security. For example, the army was involved in a protracted struggle for power against President Sukarno and the ascendant of Indonesian Communist Party, leading to a preventive countercoup by the President's supporters within the army and the Communist party; this, in turn, led the army to eliminate the Communist Party, and later deposed President Sukarno himself (Sulaiman 2008). At the same time, the army also blamed China as the mastermind of the preemptive countercoup to "lessen pressure on itself arising from the concentration of US military power in Vietnam and the presence of a CPR confrontation with the Soviet Union" and eventually decided to freeze diplomatic relations with China (Simon 1969).

With President Sukarno and the Communist Party gone, the army under President Suharto became the strongest power player in Indonesian politics. With the perceived threat from China looming in the background, the army saw it necessary to try to mend the broken fences with Indonesian neighbors immediately, and thus, it forwarded the idea of regional grouping. The Indonesian delegation that later met in Bangkok in August 1967 to establish ASEAN was mostly comprised of elements from the army (Anwar 1995). The idea of regional grouping was favorably received by leaders and elites in Southeast Asia. The fear of China was widely

shared in the region, and it became more acute as China entered the Cultural Revolution, causing the Chinese government to resort to belligerent in its rhetoric, calling upon the pro-Beijing communist parties of Southeast Asia to overthrow the established governments of the region (Than 2005).

There were reasons for Southeast Asian governments to be jittery, after all. Singapore had experienced Chinese-dominated communist strikes, triggering Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew to fear that he "would be totally strung on the lamppost" (Jones 2002). Malaysia also experienced communist insurrections back in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and in the 1960s, the sizeable Chinese population in Sarawak belonged to the Sarawak Communist Organization (Mackie 1974). In Thailand, the military dictatorship under Thanom Kittikachorn saw growing internal security threats from Hanoi and Beijing-backed insurgents in its Northeastern provinces. Another factor was the concern that the region's external defenders were getting weak-kneed. Thailand questioned the commitment of the United States to Southeast Asia, while both Malaysia and Singapore lamented the withdrawal of the United Kingdom, which guaranteed their security, leading Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman to accuse the British of failing Southeast Asia "when the chips were down" (Ba 2009).

In essence, ASEAN was seen as an indigenous regional arrangement that would bring about regional reconciliation, end the regional conflict by improving the atmosphere and substance of regional relations, and focus on economic development (Than 2005). At the same time, however, there were questions already about how far ASEAN would expand and how deep the integration would go. For instance, despite the fear of Hanoi and China, there was resistance to admitting South Vietnam. As the Singaporean Foreign Minister Rajaratnam noted, "[South Vietnam's membership] would weaken the [ASEAN] body and . . . divide Southeast Asia . . . Their entry may be looked upon by some as a political act and may also give ASEAN a military bloc outlook" (Ba 2009).

The Indonesian military has been very allergic to regional military pacts. The Indonesia military leadership specifically rejected ASEAN as a joint defense pact due to the fear that the pact would

end Indonesia's *bebas aktif* (free and active) foreign policy (Anwar 1994). This sentiment is shared by other ASEAN countries, which fear surrendering some of their sovereignty to a supranational organization (Than 2005). There is also the question of pride: there has been resistance, even today, to have the military led by officers from other ASEAN countries, considering that the Indonesian military sees itself as the big brother in the region. It was believed that the best way to deal with the question of closer integration and expansion was to sidestep them, focusing on more immediate internal threats to state security. Furthermore, because the principal threats facing the ASEAN countries were communist subversion and insurgency, a defensive alliance was simply irrelevant and unneeded. (Than 2005).

There have also been trust issues that have plagued ASEAN. Before the formation of ASEAN, a contemporary geographer, after comparing the linguistic and religious map of Southeast Asia with its political boundaries, called the entire Southeast Asia region "the Balkan of the Orient," noting that "there is hardly a single international boundary in the whole Southeast Asia which would not have called for 'rectification' by the Versailles treaty makers" (Fisher 1962). Many ASEAN countries still view Indonesia with distrust and suspicion, which was evident during the debate about ZOPFAN, as a Malaysian observer remarked that "[Indonesia's] aspiration for regional dominance are as clear as ever" (Ba 2009). As a result, ASEAN was simply unable to expand beyond the original five countries in its early years. As noted by Abdul Rahim Ishak, Singapore's Senior Minister of State (Foreign Affairs), echoing the same concerns from his Indonesian counterpart:

> [I]t is not desirable that an expansion of the membership of ASEAN occurs at the present time. ASEAN needs to build the links between the five member states. The problem of devising a strong institutional framework which will survive the present leaders of our countries must be our foremost task. The expansion of ASEAN will merely mean the dilution of our ability to communicate with one another without enhancing our capacity to influence regional order and events (Ba 2009).

Even today, while the South China Seas dispute has become a priority of ASEAN, territorial disputes remain a festering wound among ASEAN countries. These include low-intensity border conflicts between Indonesia and Malaysia concerning Ambalat, open conflict between Cambodia and Thailand regarding the area surrounding the Preah Vihear temple, and Philippine-based armed insurgency in Sarawak. Such border disputes feed trust problems, which have hindered any meaningful multilateral efforts to achieve effective, broader political, let alone military, integration (Than 2005).

In sum, concerns about threats from communist actors, especially China, facilitated the formation of ASEAN. At the same time, the concerns from the military and the lack of trust from each member nation prevented the deepening of ASEAN's institutional strength. The region's militaries wielded much influence because the regional security situation was in flux, as the problem of communist insurgencies remained paramount. Thus, the military was able to insert itself in many steps in the formation of the ASEAN and the depth of the institutional binding itself.

Expanding the Membership

The 1980s was a time of change, both internationally and regionally, and Southeast Asia felt the impact of the many profound events. Most important, however, were two significant factors. The first factor was China's renunciation of supporting domestic insurgents. The Chinese Foreign Minister Qian, in a meeting with then-Indonesian President Suharto when both of them were attending Japanese Emperor Hirohito's funeral in February 1989, gave his assurance that China would no longer maintain a relationship with the Indonesian Communist Party (Sukma 1999).

The second factor was the collapse of the military's own power. As an example, unlike in the 1960s when Suharto was just one of many generals, the Indonesian military in the 1980s was completely under President Suharto's absolute grip. Suharto had appointed his loyal followers to key posts in the government (Jenkins 1984) and thus completely dominated the military. As a result, even though the reactions from the Indonesian military were mixed,

with some insisting that normalization “should not be carried out hastily” and others pointing out that China remained a threat, on 8 August 1990, the relationship between Indonesia and China was reestablished (Sukma 1999).

In the meantime, other Southeast Asian countries, facing a changing international environment, had second thoughts regarding their original opposition to ASEAN. Back in 1967, despite heavy persuasion, Indonesia did not expect Cambodia and Myanmar to join the ASEAN (Anwar 1995). Vietnam was not invited because it was embroiled in conflict back then. But even if Vietnam had been asked, it was doubtful that Vietnam would have joined, considering it once declared ASEAN a Western imperialist tool (Nesadurai 2003). In the meantime, Laos was embroiled in conflict and thus was not approached (Than 2005).

However, with the impending collapse of the Communist bloc in the 1980s, the political calculation began to change. By the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union was no longer able (or wiling) to fund any adventures by its client states in Southeast Asia. Vietnam, in the end, believed that it had more to gain by withdrawing from Cambodia, which would allow it to focus on badly needed economic reforms and engage with other powers (Radchenko 2014). Cambodia later joined ASEAN after undergoing an internationally supervised election. Both Laos and Vietnam started their economic reform programs in 1986 with mixed results and saw ASEAN as an excellent opportunity for more economic growth.

These countries believed that by joining ASEAN, they could tap into the international market and integrate themselves into the rest of the region, thus reaping the benefits of economic integration while staving off popular discontent back home (Nesadurai 2003). Similarly with Myanmar, especially after an international boycott of the regime after the arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi and the persecution of the opposition, the military government expected that they could bypass such international pressure and get a major increase in investment through the ASEAN membership (Myint-U 2011).

The expansion of ASEAN membership was a contentious issue. On the one hand, ASEAN countries, notably Indonesia, remained

unnerved by China's political influence in the region, especially via Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (Ba 2009). There were acute concerns about China maintaining political, strategic, and military liaisons with Myanmar, and expansion of ASEAN was one way for ASEAN to weaken China's influence over that nation (Roberts 2010). On the other hand, there were questions about how the consensus-driven ASEAN could accommodate the new members' divergent interests and their probable different vision of ASEAN as a regional organization.

The breakthrough, however, came amid growing international concerns regarding the region's human rights record. With human rights rising on the international agenda, ASEAN was put on the defensive, especially after it was heavily criticized over its consideration of extending membership to Myanmar. The United States and European Union's criticisms on Myanmar's human rights record and later their imposing of sanctions on Myanmar galvanized ASEAN into fast-tracking the membership of four mainland Southeast Asia states. As Ba noted:

> [T]he very public and at times strong-armed ways come Western powers tried to interfere in ASEAN's decision-making process consequently made even more salient a founding narrative (already emotionally charged on account of ASEAN's thirtieth anniversary) about their collective pursuit of regional resilience vis-à-vis outside forces (Ba 2009).

Hence, there were several factors at play in the expansion of ASEAN in the 1990s. First, especially in Indonesia, the military's power was in decline due to the consolidation of power by President Suharto, who marginalized his opposition in the military and, in turn, curbed the military power itself. In addition, the global security equation had changed: Communism was seen as no longer that much of a threat ideologically and economically to the region. Hence, the military's concerns about the expansion of ASEAN were ignored.

Moreover, the Indonesian military had different priorities, focusing on domestic affairs, notably the unrest in Aceh, Papua, and East Timor. On the other hand, Myanmar, which was ruled by

a military dictatorship, saw ASEAN as a way to break through its international isolation and to tap ASEAN's resources. Therefore, here, there are two different militaries with different set of power, priorities, and influence.

In the end, the expansion of ASEAN in the 1990s was driven by the unwillingness of the military to give the veto, in the sense that they simply do not see much security issue in the expansion of ASEAN. In fact, surprisingly, growing international concerns of human rights abuses in the region actually spurred the expansion of ASEAN, that the ASEAN states circled the wagon, defensive over the international scrutiny; this, in turn, led to growing solidarity among the existing members of ASEAN, and spurred further expansion of ASEAN.

Conclusion

The role of the military within ASEAN is consistent with the work of international relations scholars such as Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer. Both Walt and Mearsheimer doubt that international institutions and organizations possess autonomous, independent power to act on their own, with their own specialized set of interests, in the world. Rather, such institutions are motored by the most powerful economic and military actors from within (Waltz 2000; Mearsheimer 1990). Scholars typically think of veto players as presidents, prime ministers, and legislators—the actors which overtly, formally make and execute domestic and foreign policy (Tsebelis 2002; Schweller 2006). At times, though, military officers themselves are the key decision-makers. But even when the military as an institution does not hold formal political power, it can still wield decisive informal political power from behind the scenes. As suggested above, internal security problems, the legacy of military rule and unstable states have abetted the persistence of military influence in Southeast Asian politics. But there are other possible factors: decentralized governance, as we see nowadays in democratic nations, can give militaries (as well as other domestic actors) multiple access points to shape policy; weak and ineffectual leaders, especially those who are novices on defense and security affairs, sometimes farm out those issues to the military, giving it

an enormous impact—really, a controlling influence—on foreign policy.

Overall, these arguments open up a blind spot within the literature on veto players, as it has overlooked the possibility that actors sitting outside the ruling government coalition can shape, distort, and block domestic and foreign policy. Opposition political parties, charismatic opposition leaders, viceroys and colonial bureaucrats and administration, prestigious non-political individuals, and, yes, militaries, among many others, can act as veto players (Nelson 2008). In essence, the military as an interest group is a missing link within the literature on ASEAN that could help explain why, more than sixty years after the formation of ASEAN, this regional organization remains lacking in institutional strength, especially in political and military integration. In essence, one of the main reasons why ASEAN is weak is because the military, as the key veto player, decides that a weak ASEAN suits its interests the most. The military's view of the regional threats and its own institutional power, in turn, influence whether it has approved of institutional expansion. At the same time, the power of the military as an institution also matters: a strong military could have a far stronger impact on the foreign policy decision-making process than a weak military. Considering that in some ASEAN countries, the military remains a very important interest group even today, it is a grave oversight that the military's influence on ASEAN remains an understudied part of ASEAN literature, and this article proposes further research and study on this issue, which may have an impact on the literature of international organizations as a whole.

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