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Toward a Security Community in Asia? The Limits of Constructivism, Developmental Statism, Liberalism, and Realism

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This article asks whether a regional security community has emerged in Asia with the potential to grow mature and seeks to make a contribution to the ongoing debate on this controversial topic. It advances the argument that states in this broad region are far from being able to develop a security community for reasons different from those provided by political realists, developmental statists, liberals, and constructivists (social, discursive, and emancipationist). The role of Association of Southeast Asia (ASEAN) and that of China provide excellent test cases for the theoretical proposition that the building of a successful regional security community requires at least two necessary conditions: liberal democracy and regional democratic leadership, which remain absent in Asia.

Keywords: regional security community, Asia, ASEAN, China, European Union, North America, constructivism, liberalism, political realism, liberal democracy, regional democratic leadership

Introduction

This article raises the important question of whether states in Asia have been willing and able to form a security community in which war between or among them is no longer possible as regional peace prevails. The answer is perspective dependent and the academic debate on this question that began early in the 1990s continues (for various perspectives on ASEAN, see Sorpong Peou, 2022). One area for optimism is the story of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), long regarded by its proponents as one of the most successful regional organizations in the world in terms of its ability to achieve regional prosperity, stability, and peace—and, to some, second only to the European Union. The persistence of interstate peace in this subregion led Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffery Sng (2017) to make the case that ASEAN is worthy of a Nobel Peace Prize. Social constructivists also tend to think that ASEAN emerged as a nascent security community after the Cold War and perhaps has the potential to reach maturity. But pessimists have at one time or another written an obituary for the organization, viewing it as becoming less and less relevant. Critics and skeptics alike, especially those who belong to the realist camp, paint a less rosy picture of this organization and its future. Now that ASEAN has reached its 55th birthday, it is time to take another close look at the shortcomings of these competing perspectives.

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This article makes a contribution to the existing academic literature by further advancing the argument that ASEAN is far from being a mature security community for reasons different from those provided by realists (Putra, Darwis, & Burhanuddin, 2019; Khoo, 2004; 2015; Kaplan, 2014; Mearsheimer, 2006), developmental statists [1] (developmental statists include Jones, 2008), and constructivists (social, discursive, and emancipationist) (social constructivists include Acharya, 1991; 2001; 2021; Ba, 2006; Johnston, 2003. Those who adopt discursive constructivism include Martel, 2020. Emancipationists include Chang, 2016). Successful regional security community development requires at least two necessary conditions: liberal democracy and democratic leadership. *The building and maintenance of a regional security community is what democratic governments and the most powerful democracy make of it*[2] (see, for instance, Jones, 2008; Caballero-Anthony, 2019; Chang, 2016). This proposition is based on the theoretical assumption that democratic regimes led by liberal democrats matter significantly in terms of their ability to build a regional security community; however, a security community is unlikely to grow mature in a region without any effective democratic leadership. In spite of its decades-long economic successes and efforts at institution and collective-identity building, ASEAN still does not meet the two conditions. Only one ASEAN state—Indonesia—can be considered democratic, but its democracy remains defective. In spite of its reputation as *de facto* regional leader, Indonesia is nowhere in a position to provide effective leadership. Evidence further shows that China being a dictatorship makes it difficult, if not impossible, for this rising power to lead in the way of building a regional security community. Overall, the legitimate idea of establishing a security community in Asia remains a distant dream.

ASEAN as a Security Community: A Critique

The concept of regional security community is generally understood as one whose members develop dependable expectations for peaceful change. Regional security persists as member states are no longer prepared for war as their community evolves in three phases: nascent, ascendant, and mature (Adler & Barnett, 1998).

On the surface, evidence confirms the constructivist arguments that ASEAN emerged in the early 1990s as a security community whose members had not fought each other since the formation of their organization. Peace and security in the ASEAN region can be described in several ways.

Firstly, it is important to define what war and peace means in the context of this regional group. At the interstate level and in a traditional sense, war is the opposite of peace (peace is the absence of war). According to Quincy Wright (1968), war between or among states is defined as one carried out by their "armed forces of considerable magnitude, for a considerable period of time" (p. 453) and, for Melvin Small and David Singer (1982), a war is a war when it involves in the taking of human life, meaning at least 1,000 battle deaths per year. Worth emphasizing here is the fact that the absence of war among states does not necessarily mean there is a security community among them, nor does the war on terrorism imply the absence of such a community. Although it may cause more than 1,000 deaths per year, terrorism and counterterrorism are not a war fought between or among states. This type of global violence—global terrorism and the global war on terrorism—is one fought between governments and domestic or transnational terror groups. There have been terror attacks in

[1] In his rejection of democracy and human rights as the necessary conditions for the promotion of regionalism, he writes the following: "enhancing mechanisms that promote the integration of a single market are more in keeping with the prudential ends of building regional cooperation than any abstract rationalist assault on the sovereignty of member states" (p. 756).

[2] This article takes a position different from realists, liberals, and constructivists who view liberal democracy and democratic leadership as unnecessary conditions.

states in Europe and North America, but they do not invalidate the point that the two regions remain the only two mature security communities that exist in the world (Adler &Barnett, 1998, p. 55).

Secondly and based on the above definition of war, we can make the case that the ASEAN members have been at peace with each other from their first day together. Prior to 1967, the founding ASEAN states had experienced some real tensions. Indonesia and Malaysia engaged in a military confrontation from 1963 to 1966, as the former sought to prevent the latter from forming a state (the Federation of Malaysia) that emerged in 1963. The British Commonwealth, which involved its members such as Australia and New Zealand, fought against Indonesia, especially on the island of Borneo, but it was a limited war and ended when Indonesia and Malaysia signed a peace treaty on 11 August 1966. Their bilateral relations remain far from ideal, however (Kartika & Sinatra, 2017). Both Malaysia and the Philippines nearly went to war over Sabah in the 1960s. In 1961, the Philippines made a territorial claim over Sabah, which decided to join Malaysia in 1963. Although a group of over 200 armed men from the Philippines went to Sabah in 2013, the two countries did not start a war against each other. This evidence does not suggest that ASEAN states no longer experience domestic insurgencies. The armed conflict between the Thai military and the Muslim rebels resulted in large casualties (some 5,000 deaths since it first broke out in 2005) (Wagner & Caflero, n.d.), but this is an ethnic conflict rather than an interstate one. Bilateral tensions between Malaysia and Thailand over ethnic conflict in Thailand's southern provinces dominated by Muslims remain unresolved (Funston, 2010), but there has been no war between them.

The new members of ASEAN also have not gone to war against each other either or with any older members. Since they jointed ASEAN (Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999), these states have not fought against each other or any older members. The Indochinese subregion (made up of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam) had gone through three major wars, known as the First, Second, and Third Indochina Wars. The Third Indochina War began when Vietnam invaded Cambodia late in 1979, sending nearly 200,000 troops into the latter, resulting in the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime and the Chinese war on Vietnam in retaliation against the latter for its invasion of Cambodia. The War ended when Vietnam pulled its troops out of Cambodia in the late 1980s. Cambodian-Vietnamese relations have since been relatively peaceful, despite unresolved territorial disputes. Armed clashes along the Cambodian-Thai border in 2008 produced only small numbers of deaths (Wagner, 2011). Since 2021, the border shared between Myanmar and Thailand has at times grown tense. According to one report, for instance, "In December, there was an exchange of artillery fire between the Myanmar and Thai armies. There have also been reports of stray artillery shells landing on Thai soil"[3] (Oh, 2022). But none of the above violent incidents can be considered a war between ASEAN states.

Thirdly, cooperation has become a regional norm. As of October 2012, the ASEAN member states had also managed to enhance their cooperation by reaching 367 agreements, declarations, and treaties[4], the most important of which included the ASEAN Declaration on the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (1971), the Declaration of ASEAN Concord (1976), the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (1976). ASEAN has also succeeded in doing what other regions, including Northeast Asia and the Middle East, have failed: namely, the Bangkok Treaty of 1995, better known as the Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone. In that Treaty, the

[3] https://fulcrum.sg/separatists–conflict–and–refugees–geopolitics–along–thailand–and–indias–myanmar–border/.

[4] Table of ASEAN Treaties/Agreements and Ratification, as of October 2012. http://asean.org/wp–content/uploads/images/2012/resources/TABLE%20OF%20AGREEMENT%20%20RATIFICATION–SORT%20BY%20DATE–Web–October2012.pdf.

ASEAN members are determined "to take concrete action which will contribute to the progress toward general and complete disarmament of nuclear weapons, and to the promotion of international peace and security".[5] Built on the ASEAN Declaration on the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) and the Program of Action on ZOPFAN signed in 1993, the Treaty reaffirms the importance of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

In more recent years, ASEAN has sought to deepen relations among its members by further institutionalizing its cooperation through other policy measures, including the adoption of an ASEAN Charter at the November 2007 Summit. The ASEAN states have also developed a collective aspiration to create a regional community. The regional project is a positive step in the right direction. The fact that former enemies in Southeast Asia have agreed to build something far more visionary than a mere truce among themselves is truly remarkable. No other regional organizations, except the European Union, have come close to being as successful as ASEAN whose members have benefited from cooperation and agreed to turn their organization into an aspiring community of communities: cultural, economic, and political security, which together can be characterized in theory as a regional security community.

The question is whether the above positive developments have transformed ASEAN into a genuine regional security community, as social constructivists think. One objection to this line of reasoning is that the overall level of peace and security that the ten ASEAN member states have enjoyed has little to do with their collective identity. For some scholars, peace in this region is part of the overall trend in the international system. According to one source, "the number of wars increased until the breakdown of the Soviet Union and has been decreasing since then. Extra–state conflicts are colonial conflicts that ended with the end of colonialism. Interstate conflicts—wars fought between countries—have almost ceased to exist"[6] (Roser, Hasell, Herre, & Macdonald, 2016). Mark Beeson, thus, raises legitimate questions about the merit of ASEAN as a peacebuilder. In his words, "it is not unreasonable to assume that ASEAN's existence must have done some 'socializing' effect with the grouping…" But he questions the extent of its institutional impact on peace: "it is more difficult to claim that ASEAN is responsible for the 'long peace of Asia'. The fact is that inter–state warfare has declined everywhere, so it is hard to know how much credit ASEAN deserves" (Beeson, 2016, p. 57). John Ravenhill (2009) makes a similar argument: "The last forty years, after all, have witnessed inter–state conflict worldwide decline—and an enduring peace has characterized other regions besides ASEAN that are comprised primarily of developing economies" (p. 222). Conventional deterrence and/or utilitarian calculations by Asian elites may have contributed to the regional peace. Nicholas Khoo (2004) further attributes to any peace in the ASEAN as the "workings of power or threat balances" (p. 44). Evelyn Goh (2007) focuses on the role of hegemonic structure as conducive to stability in Southeast Asia. For others, peace results from the post-Cold War unipolar moment (Krauthammer, 2002)

The problem with critics of the ASEAN peace is that they tend to generalize the global decline of war without looking into specific regions. Since the end of the Cold War, different regions have experienced different degrees of peace. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the US-led war on Iraq in 2003, and the rise of the Islamist State in Iraq and Syria as well as the proxy war in Yemen are the best examples of the Middle East as a region more prone to war than Southeast Asia. According to Global Peace Index (2017), "since 2015,

[5] See ASEAN. 2012. Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone. https://asean.org/treaty-on-the-southeast-asia-nuclear-weapon-free-zone/

[6] https://ourworldindata.org/war–and–peace/.

the Middle East and North Africa was the least peaceful region in the world and deteriorated further" (The Institute for Economics and Peace, 2017, p. 14). The Asia-Pacific region ranks third in terms of overall peacefulness, behind only Europe and North America: "Europe remains the most peaceful region, followed by North America" (The Institute for Economics and Peace, 2017, p. 14). There has been no war between states in North America since 1812 and in Western Europe since the end of World War II. States in North America and Europe have transformed their regions into mature regional security communities (Adler & Barnett, 1998, p. 55), but those in Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia have not: interstate relations in the former remain more prone to war than those in the latter.

States in Northeast Asia have failed to do what the ASEAN states have done. Nor serious scholars worry more about relations among ASEAN states than those among China and Taiwan as well as North and South Korea. After more than half a century of a bloody interstate war that claimed 1,200,000 lives, both North and South Korea remain technically at war. The missile race seems to intensify (Lewis, 2015), driven by North Korea's growing number of missile tests that have provoked not only South Korea but other states in the region, especially Japan. Washington has threatened to go war with North Korea. In September 2017, President Donald Trump threatened to "totally destroy" North Korea and has considered China to be the main threat of its security. North and South Koreas are still technically at war, despite recent peace efforts between their political leaders and the two summits held by US President Donald Trump and North Korea's leader Kim Jung-Un. China and Taiwan, the two major Chinese states in the subregion, are nowhere close to unification, as evidenced by the fact that the former has directed missiles at the latter. China and Japan have put their best efforts to ensure their cooperation, but the two major states have not made any move toward building a real strategic partnership. What has become increasingly evident is that Japan has sought to promote a quadrilateral security initiative (known as Quad) with three other states, namely Australia, India, and the United States (Harding, 2019; Tomohiko, 2019). Northeast Asia is not the kind of regional community similar to ASEAN, especially in terms of the ability of the major states in the former to adopt treaties similar to those of the latter, and this point makes it difficult for any scholars to conclude that the overall global trend is what explains more peace in Southeast Asia.

By no means does this article suggest that ASEAN is now well into the second phase: ascendent, characterized by "increasingly defense network; new institutions and organizations that reflect either tighter military coordination and cooperation and/or decreased fear that the other represents a threat; cognitive structures that promote 'seeing' and acting together, and, therefore, the deepening of the level of mutual trust, and the emergence of collective identities that begin to encourage dependable expectations for peaceful change" (Adler & Barnett, 1998, p. 53). Although none of the ASEAN states has started a war against another and despite their aspiration to build a security community, border demilitarization, unresolved border disputes, intramural tensions, high defence spending, and armed clashes do not even make ASEAN an ascendent security community. Even the leading proponent of ASEAN as a regional security community now recognizes the challenges the regional organization faces, ranging from intramural tensions, nontraditional security threats such as climate change, geopolitical rivalry, especially in the South China Sea, and great power politics. Amitav Acharya (2021), for instance, acknowledges that ASEAN faces these challenges and "could face a bleak future" (p. 128).

ASEAN is not much younger than the European Union in terms of institutional history nor are the ASEAN states younger than the states in North America in terms of their existence, but states in Southeast Asia have not demilitarized their borders the way Canada and the United States as well as the EU members have. After their

last war in 1812, Canada and the United States have been successful in demilitarizing their border, making it the world's longest undefended international boundary. States in North America and Europe still spend far more on defence than those of other regions, including Southeast Asia but do not prepare for war against each other. In North America, the United States is the biggest defence spender in the world, but neither Canada nor Mexico is its major military target. Canada and the United States are not only NATO members but also have joint military cooperation in the form of North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD, established in 1958 to defend North America through conducting aerospace warning and control). The European Union may be entertaining ideas about militarization, but this process is not about its members militarizing their national borders. In a common search to make their organization less dependent on the United States and NATO, some EU leaders apparently want to build a regional security structure under EU command (van der Pijl, 2021).

States in ASEAN continue to increase spending on national defence, and their defence spending has shifted from its focus on domestic security threats (such as armed insurgencies in Thailand and ethnic conflicts in Myanmar) to external sources of threat. Territorial disputes among ASEAN members also remain unresolved. In spite of the long-standing rely on the dispute settlement provisions of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea LOSC (Bautista, 2014), although no arms racing among its members is evident in the region, since their share of aggregate gross domestic product (GDP) and defence investments remain stable, military expenditures in ASEAN have been high. In the last few years, the ASEAN states' military spending has nearly doubled. Most notably, Thailand and Indonesia's military budget has been snowballing at the rate of 10% on a year-by-year basis. It is interesting to note that Vietnam arms import has spiked 700% over a decade, making it one of the top 10 purchasers of arms. Other ASEAN states have been increasingly importing fighter jets, frigates, helicopters, submarines, and the like (Irum, 2019).

Moreover, a common defence and foreign policy framework in ASEAN does not exist. The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus are regular events, formally institutionalized to strengthen mutual trust (Tang, 2016), but "intramural threat perceptions" remain prevalent (Ganesan, n.d., p. 129). Tensions within ASEAN remain and, in some cases, appear to have deteriorated. The atrocities and the coup in February 2021 committed by the military in Myanmar have pit the country against other ASEAN members. After nine ASEAN leaders and the junta chief of Myanmar, Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, had agreed in April on five points to end the crisis after the coup in 2021, the latter shows defiance to each of them and continues its "brutal nationwide crackdown aimed at suppressing the millions of people opposed to military rule" (Watch, 2022). In August, ASEAN appointed Brunei's second foreign minister, Erywan Yusof, as its special envoy to Myanmar, but his visit to the country scheduled for October was canceled when the military regime rejected his plan to visit detained opposition leaders. In an unprecedented move, the regional organization banned Gen. Min Aung Hlaing from attending the biannual summit.

If Southeast Asia, North America, and Western Europe have not experienced the same level of regional peace and stability, what explains the variation? Realist-inclined scholars offer their own explanations but remain unpersuasive. Their perspectives cannot adequately explain the fact that Southeast Asia has become more peaceful than Northeast Asia. If one refers to the United States as the regional balancer, then a counterargument can be made: The United States may be a stabilizing regional force, but at the same time this global power has contributed to the rising tensions in Northeast Asia, because of its military presence in Japan and South Korea. If the balance of power between China and United States is treated as the source of peace and

stability in East Asia as some realists suggest, then we cannot explain the fact that Northeast Asia is less stable or more prone to war than Southeast Asia, where there is some resemblance of a security community.

In short, the critique that the ASEAN security community does not exist (as realists suggest) is inaccurate, nor is it accurate to characterize ASEAN as more than a nascent security community, despite its members' collective aspiration to create a regional community. Realists cannot explain why neither the unipolar moment nor the presence of US forces in Northeast Asia has made this subregion more prone to war than Southeast Asia. Nor can their insights shed enough light on the fact that ASEAN has not matured as a regional security community to the extent that both Europe and North America have become. None of the ASEAN members has not gone to war against another and their region has been more stable than Northeast Asia, though some serious border tensions remain. Territorial disputes, a source of bilateral tensions, remain unresolved and defence spending by ASEAN states still remains high. The main proponent of ASEAN as a security community, Amitav Acharya (2021), now writes the following: "it could suffer a less sanguine fate than after past challenges, from being a 'nascent' to a 'decadent' security community, and bring an inglorious end to its 'long peace'" (p. 134).

Why Democracy Matters

The developmental statist assertion that "liberal democracy has done little to secure stability" and that "the most successfully developed members of ASEAN follow non-liberal modes of political organization" (Jones, 2008, p. 756) is more concerned with the process of democratization than its outcomes and historical evidence. There still exist major challenges to sustainable peace and security in the ASEAN region: economic disparities, cultural diversity, under-institutionalization, and, above all else, authoritarian regimes.

Most remarkable about ASEAN has been its economic growth, a factor that keeps its members in cooperative relations. The founding ASEAN members joined the East Asian "miracle" when they achieved impressive economic growth in a short period of time. Singapore emerged as the biggest success story in Southeast Asia. As part of a former British colony city (made up of Malaysia and Penang) with a small population and no natural resources, this ASEAN member gained its independence in 1965 from the Federation of Malaysia and transformed itself into a developed country in 1987, just twenty years after the birth of the regional organization. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand also gained their international reputation as economic "tigers". In more recent years, other tiger economies emerged in ASEAN. The Philippines' economic growth continued (6.9% in 2016; 6.7% in 2017) and is predicted to rise to 7% by 2022. Vietnam was the first among the new members to enjoy this status as its economic growth rate has been high on average (6.5% from 2000-2017). According to The Economist (2016), "Since 1990 its growth has averaged nearly 6% a year per person, second only to China. That has lifted it from among the world's poorest countries to middle–income status. If Vietnam can deliver 7% growth for another decade, its trajectory would be similar to those of China and the Asian tigers".[7] Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar are still far behind, but their economic growth has been high. The Asian Development Bank (2016) predicts Cambodia will be one of the new tiger economies.

With a combined population of 630 million, ASEAN as a whole has the potential to continue expanding its prosperity that its members have enjoyed over the last several decades and this reality is what keeps its members together. At the start of 2016, ASEAN emerged as the world's seventh largest economy. At the start

[7] https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2016/08/06/good-afternoon-vietnam.

of 2017, the organization ranked sixth, and it is predicted that its rank will improve to fifth in 2020. By 2030, according to the Asian Development Bank, nearly half a billion of the ASEAN population will be classified as middle-income class. If member states can align their interests with the ASEAN community agenda, their combined economic performance will be better, with a potential growth rate of seven percent (Yong, 2017).

But economic growth and prosperity alone do not necessarily lead to peace, as commercial liberals suggest, nor do they continue to deepen economic integration in Southeast Asia, as developmental statists assume. In spite of economic growth, as noted earlier, ASEAN has not developed well into an ascendent regional security community. The major states in Northeast Asia—China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan— have enjoyed economic growth and prosperity, but the subregion has become less stable than Southeast Asia.

Do regional institutions, thus, matter more than economic growth? A quick comparative analysis of the European Union and ASEAN appears to confirm that this may be the case: the former has become far more institutionalized than ASEAN. According to a long-time observer of ASEAN, Barry Desker (2017), "the ASEAN Secretariat continues to be poorly funded and is ineffective in playing a bridging role. The gap between rhetoric and commitment is seen in the humble budget for the ASEAN Secretariat at US$20 million in 2017" (p. 3). The ASEAN budget is 6,000 times smaller than the EU's. Still, according to Richard Stubbs (2017), ASEAN has played an effective, legitimate, and efficient (measured in terms of its small budget and the peace it has produced role) role in ensuring peace. But this point, while insightful and valid to some extent, still does not fully answer the question of why ASEAN is still far less mature than Europe and North America. What institutionalists may often overlook is the fact that mature security communities may not even require strong regional or supranational institutions: North America is a mature security community but remains regionally less institutionalized than ASEAN: the region has not established regional institutions compared to those of ASEAN.

One can then raise another question about how a regional security evolves: Does culture matter more? This seems to be the case when one subscribes to Samuel Huntington's clash-of-civilization thesis. According to Huntington (1993), a civilization is "the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species" (p. 41). It is "the biggest 'we' within which we feel culturally at home as distinguished from all the other 'thems' out there" (p. 43). Major civilizations in the world include Western, Orthodox, Chinese, Japanese, Muslim, Hindu, Latin American, and African. The ASEAN aspiration to become a cultural community is commendable but still has its shortcomings. The member states do not share the same civilization: their people do not speak the same language; they do not embrace the same faith. Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand share one faith, namely Buddhism. Islam has been the dominant religion in Brunei, Indonesia, and Malaysia. The majority of Filipinos are Catholics. The civilizational diversity of Southeast Asia is well-recognized by Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffery Sng (2017) who make the following remark: "Only in Southeast Asia do all these different cultures and civilizations meet. No other regions in the world can match its cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnic diversity" (p. 346).

Cultural diversity may thus be a factor that inhabits ASEAN from becoming as community-oriented as either Europe or North America, both of which more or less share the same civilization. Cultural diversity is a source of tension. Myanmar is a good example. Members of the Rohingya community (a stateless Muslim minority group), for instance, have been subjected to persecutions or human rights violations. Whether one likes it or not, members of the international community have considered what has happened to the Rohingya as

a form of ethnic cleansing or genocide. Muslim members of ASEAN have reacted to Myanmar's mistreatment of the Rohingya with growing concern. There are signs that the ASEAN members are divided over the Rohingya crisis. Since October 2017, more than 700,000 Rohingya fled from Myanmar's Rhakine state to Bangladesh. According to a report (Zein, 2017), ASEAN issued a statement that the humanitarian crisis was "a complex inter-communal issue with deep historical roots"[8], but Muslim members of ASEAN raised issues with the statement. Malaysia said the statement was a "misrepresentation of the reality" and "it would like to disassociate itself". Its foreign minister also pressured Myanmar into ending what he characterized as "atrocities which have unleashed a full-scale humanitarian crisis". If not effectively managed, communal violence rooted in religious convictions makes it harder for the people in Southeast Asia and ASEAN to share a common cultural identity.

Cultural explanations still have explanatory limitations, however. For one thing, culture is indeterminate. If Southeast Asia is more culturally diverse than other regions, why is it that the region has become more peaceful than some other regions that are culturally less diverse, such as Northeast Asia (heavily influenced by Confucianism), the Middle East (dominated by Islam), and even Europe before World War II? Huntington's argument about regional peace based on shared civilizational values can be further falsified by the fact that states in Northeast Asia have been unable to create a regional security community or have not even shown any collective aspiration to build one, despite the same civilization to which they belong. The countries in this subregion are still rivals or enemies: China vs. Taiwan, North vs. South Koreas, and China vs. Vietnam despite their shared Confucian tradition (Tu, 2000). Although the members of the European Union share the same civilization rooted in Christianity, the region has not always been peaceful either. Many major wars broke out, such as the Thirty-Year War (1618-1648), World War I (1914-1918), and World War II (1939-1945).

The evidence discussed above further poses a challenge to the constructivist proposition that states with different cultural values can engage in the process of dialogue and socialization to build collective norms and identities—an ideational condition for security community building. But little evidence shows that members of ASEAN (and the ASEAN Regional Forum) have succeeded in meeting this condition. The idea that ASEAN is a "family" is more of a myth than a reality. If it exists, this social construct is far from consolidated. After more than five decades, there is no reason to think that the "ASEAN family" is now at peace. Due to culturally diverse, the ASEAN states still do not have a strong collective social identity. One of the long-term observers of ASEAN, Barry Desker, points out that collective identity in Southeast Asia remains a fragile phenomenon:

> A commitment to ASEAN only exists among policymakers, academics, journalists and those who participate in ASEAN-centered activities. By contrast, for most of the diverse peoples living in Southeast Asia, the idea of an ASEAN Community with shared values and a common identity looking towards a common identity is a wish to be fulfilled. (Desker, 2017, p. 3)

Some scholars propose the idea of a "people-oriented" regional community and this proposal marks a step in the right direction, but the rationale behind it still rests on the idea that civil society organizations should play a greater role in the process of regional community building. The trouble with this thinking is that the role of this nonstate actor has not been influential enough to transform the region. In fact, its overall political influence has been limited and its role as a norm entrepreneur has declined (Caballero-Anthony, 2019).

[8] http://www.theglobepost.com/2017/10/09/asean–rohingya–repatriation/.

Evidence still supports the fact that types of political ideology and regime matter a great deal when the subject of regional community is closely examined. Samuel Huntington's argument that culture now matters more than ideology is highly problematic and the same can be said about Francis Fukuyama's (1989; 1992) premature assertion about the triumph of liberal democracy. Democracy matters more than culture but appears to be running out of steam (Rosenberg, 2019). If democracy in Europe and North America were to decline, their communities would also fall apart. What is becoming increasingly evident is that the struggle for power and security between dictatorships and democracies has intensified in recent decades (i.e., China and Russia vs. the West). The realist argument about the resurgence of geopolitics, the struggles for power between revisionist states (such as China, Iran, and Russia) and the West (especially the United States) is empirically valid, but only up to a point (Mead, 2014). Upon closer examination, the struggles are between dictatorships and democracies are also prevalent in the Asia-Pacific and, thus, making them unfit to build a regional community together.

Strong evidence, moreover, shows that states that engage in hostility tend to be those that are ideologically different or rivalrous. For example, China is a dictatorship (Ringen, 2016), whereas Taiwan is the most democratic state in East Asia. More can be said about North vs. South Korea and China vs. Japan. Democratic and undemocratic states are not always mutually hostile or engage warfare, but evidence shows that democratic states tend to be better at achieving cooperation than undemocratic states. Within the Asia-Pacific, democracies have maintained their Cold War security alliances, while the security alliances among undemocratic states come and go. The security alliances between democracies include the US-Japan alliance, the US-South Korea alliance, and the US-Australia alliance (Cha, 2010). By no means does this point suggest that liberal democracies behave peacefully to all states. Although democratic states tend to be at peace with one another, they also tend to behave more aggressively toward undemocratic states. As a world power, the United States has gone to war against authoritarian states or dictatorships, such as the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya (i.e., the NATO intervention in 2011), more than any other major powers (including Russia) in recent decades.

In contrast, the security alliances between communist and undemocratic states—between China and the Soviet Union, China and Vietnam, and Cambodia and Vietnam—did not last. Sino-Soviet relations began to deteriorate in the late 1950s to the point where they went to war in 1969 over border issues. The two states never recovered from their animosities that deepened during the Cold War because of their geopolitical rivalry in various regions, including Indochina (van de Ven, 2015). They both supported North Vietnam in the latter's effort to defeat the United States, but Vietnam later turned its back on its Chinese patron after reunification in 1975 and has now moved closer to its former archenemy, the United States. China went to war against Vietnam in February 1979 after the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia late in December 1978.

Strong evidence still suggests that undemocratic states are unlikely to succeed in building regional security communities and that democracy matters more significantly than economic growth, prosperity, institutions and cultural norms when one seeks to explain the process of regional security community building. There are several reasons. Firstly, democratic and undemocratic states are unlikely to socialize effectively by easily turning enmity into amity. Although constructivists tend to insist that democracy is not a sufficient condition for security community building, they often mean otherwise. Alexander Wendt (1998), for instance, does not think that democracy matters in the process of forming a collective identity, but he makes this notable assertion: "A British [military] build–up will be less threatening to the United States than a North Korean one, and build–ups are less likely to occur in a security community than in a security dilemma" (p. 423).

What Wendt's assertion implies is that the United States and Britain do not find each other as threatening as they find North Korea, but this begs the question of why a smaller power like North Korea poses a greater threat to more powerful states. Both Britain and the United States are democracies, but North Korea is not. This distinction helps explain why the two democratic states do not trust dictatorships like North Korea. It is a fact that the United States and other democracies have sought to denuclearize North Korea but made no effort to denuclearize each other and their democratic allies, like Israel, and this goes to show that democratic states trust each other enough to let themselves and their allies possess nuclear weapons. But they distrust undemocratic states and seek to denuclearize them, particularly North Korea and Iran (Congressional Research Service, 2019).

Evidence still supports the proposition that democracies have a better change of working together to build and maintain regional peace communities. Empirically, all of the European and North American security communities are democratic states. There are good reasons for thinking that this is the case. Aaron Friedberg (2011), for instance, is correct when contending that only democracies can coexist peacefully. Evidence from Europe and North America validates the point that "nationalist passions, territorial disputes, and arms races [over there] were fast dwindling into historical memory" (Friedberg, 2011, p. 13).

Further evidence suggests to the contrary that states in ASEAN have not achieved the level of cooperation or integration to the extent required by the need to help them grow together as members of a regional security community largely because the ASEAN members are mostly undemocratic. Both Malaysia and Singapore can be best described as semi-democratic. Thailand and the Philippines used to be considered the most democratic states in Southeast Asia, but they have come under authoritarian rule. The Thai military remains the most powerful state institution and dominates the political regime (Peou, 2014). Under the autocratic rule of President Rodrigo Duterte, The Philippines has violated human rights. Cambodia emerged as a democracy in the early 1990s but has in recent years been moving toward a one-party state. During the 2013 election, Cambodia's political system was evidently more competitive than Malaysia's and Singapore's, but the ruling party (Cambodian People's Party) has now tightened its grip on political power over the opposition and taken repressive steps by arresting, prosecuting, and jailing its political opponents. Myanmar remains dominated by the military elite, despite recent democratization, and the coup staged by the military in 2021 put an end to civilian rule. Both Vietnam and Laos are the only socialist states in ASEAN with some form of state capitalism, but no one regards them as politically liberal. Of the ten ASEAN states, only Indonesia can be considered democratic but its democracy remains defective. Its political transformation is placed in 48th place among 137 countries and territories. According to Bertelsmann Stiftung's (2022) Transformation Index BTI 2022, "Between 2019 and 2021, the quality of democracy in Indonesia continued to slowly but noticeably deteriorate" (p. 3).

Some ASEAN members even show signs of moving toward theocracy. Recent developments in Indonesia (the most democratic state in ASEAN), Malaysia, and Brunei have resulted in more reinforcement of Sharia Law. In Indonesia's Aceh, public canings have been carried out for women seen in public with men who were not their husbands (Newman, 2021). The ruling party in Malaysia's Kaletan state, where Sharia Law has been strictly reinforced (such as banning nightclubs and cinemas), recently introduced public canings for religious crimes such as adultery and alcohol drinking, despite criticisms from politicians and human rights groups (Worley, 2017). Brunei has done most to strengthen Sharia Law, turning itself into the first Asian country to implement the law that allows, among other things, limbs to be cut off, adulterers and homosexuals to be put to death. The law applies to everyone regardless of one's religion (Reuters Staff, 2019).

ASEAN states' human rights records are also far from ideal. In 2009, the organization managed to establish an ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, which in turn drafted an ASEAN Human Rights Declaration in 2012, but critics have pointed out that none of these policy tools was designed to protect human rights. There is also ample evidence showing that this policy instrument has been ineffectively implemented, as the Rohingya plight, for instance, continues unabated. The AICHR does not have mandate to receive and investigate any human rights complaints. It is worth recalling that these policy tools were adopted largely because of three democratic states at the time, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines favored them. Ever since President Rodrigo Duterte came to power and Thailand has come under military rule, Indonesia has been more or left alone to think about human rights. Indonesia's human rights records are not far more impressive either. "Protection of civil rights", for instance, "remained volatile between 2019 and 2021" as "[f]ollowers of nonmainstream religious groups, left-wing activists and Papuan pro-independence campaigners continued to experience severe violations of their civil rights, both by the state and other members of society" (Stiftung, 2022, p. 11).

This is not to say that ASEAN made no progress on human rights. In fact, the people of ASEAN have become more secure than ever before, especially when one examines members' records during the Cold War. One big indicator of this progress is the disappearing of mass atrocities. The point being made here does not deny the fact that its member states still have poor human rights records, as will be pointed later, but it does suggest that mass atrocities such as genocide, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing have almost disappeared. With the exception of the persecutions of the Rohingya minority group in Myanmar and serious mistreatment of minorities in some ASEAN states, to be discussed later, Southeast Asia has not witnessed the levels of mass violence that took place during the Cold War. It is worth recalling Indonesia's anti-communist, anti-Chinese atrocities in the mid-1960s, mass atrocities during the Vietnam War, the communist crimes after Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam fell into the hands of communist revolutionaries, especially the Khmer Rouge killing fields during the second half of the 1970s (Courtois, Werth, Panné, Paczkowski, Bartošek, & Margolin, 1999), and the atrocities committed against East Timorese after the Indonesian annexation of East Timor in 1975, as well as the atrocities that took place before, during, and after the 1999 referendum. These atrocities were large-scale, leaving millions of people dead and untold numbers of people suffering. Overall, mass atrocities, now with the exception of the Rohingya humanitarian crisis that still persists in Myanmar, have diminished and this positive phenomenon can be considered a miracle (Bellamy, 2014).

In spite of progress on the human rights front, the ASEAN states fall far short of becoming democratic and this factor helps shine the light on the organization's failure to progress toward the second phase of regional security community. Several good reasons help make sense of this reality but maintaining state sovereignty is not one. The North-American security community, as note pointed out earlier, has not created any supranational institutions like those in the European Union. However, their national democratic institutions appear to have had a positive impact on their foreign policy behavior. The liberal democratic norms of tolerance and mutual trust have enabled them to develop into regional security communities. As discussed earlier, the members of these communities have left their borders undefended and abandoned the notion of territoriality among themselves. As James Sperling (2007) aptly puts it, "Territoriality is increasingly irrelevant, particularly in Europe and North America. These states no longer enjoy a territorial 'wall of defensibility' that would leave them relatively immune to external penetration" (p. 282). There seems to be a correlation between democracy and the growing irrelevance of territoriality among post- or late-Westphalian states. This does not suggest that all

democratic states are post-Westphalian but that they tend to move in this direction. Some democracies in Europe and North America, such as Canada, Germany, and Italy, display the characteristics of the post-Westphalian state, but others like France, Britain, and the United States can still be characterized late-Westphalian. Thus, both post-Westphalian and late-Westphalian states tend to be democratic and favorable to the institutionalization of mutual security cooperation, which is not the case for Westphalian states. In contrast, most states in the Asia-Pacific are still Westphalian in that they "are [still] preoccupied with protecting autonomy and independence, retaining a gatekeeping role, and avoiding external interference in domestic constitutional arrangements" (Sperling, 2007, p. 282).

The ASEAN states and those in Northeast Asia, especially China and North Korea, remain strictly state-centric or Westphalian. Thus, what stand in their way of moving toward being a genuine regional security community is the persistence of their undemocratic regimes whose leaders reject liberal norms, the most important of which include tolerance and mutual trust. Authoritarian regimes are intolerant not only of political rights (such as the right to form credible political parties) and civil liberties (such as freedom of expression, and the right to protest) but also of interference in each other's domestic affairs. Moreover, the authoritarian regime leaders in ASEAN do not even trust their own people, as evidenced by the fact that they do not even allow free and fair elections that might lead to their downfall, and this lack of trust still inhibits any attempts by their citizens to help build a collective identity useful to the process of regional community building. In his speech on Armed Forces Day on 27 March 2022 (in response to pressure from civil society and ASEAN), for instance, the top general in Myanmar referred to opposition groups, especially the anti-coup movement, as terrorist groups to be annihilated and thus "will no longer take into account negotiation with" them (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Evidently, most peoples in Southeast Asia still do not regard themselves as ASEAN citizens[9] (Chang, 2016, p. 344), especially when their national leaders do not even respect their rights and when ASEAN has done little to protect and promote them. ASEAN has been largely ineffective in terms of addressing human rights abuses by member governments and its Inter-governmental Commission on Human Rights remains docile and compliant. ASEAN has not become more people-oriented, despite "the discursive practices" in the region "have allowed" nonstate actors like civil society actors "to challenge, disrupt, and to some extent reshape ASEAN's identity as a security community in the making" (Martel, 2020, p. 597). While the role of civil society organizations is important in the process of making ASEAN as a security community, "there has not been much development of ASEAN's practical capacity to alleviate the plight of the Rohingya" (Martel, 2020, p. 597).

Evidence further reveals the lack of mutual trust among the ASEAN member states. Not only have they been unwilling to demilitarize their joint borders and reduced defence spending but have also proved unable to trust each other enough to abandon the idea of territoriality. The prevalence of intramural threat perceptions, as noted earlier, has also resulted from undemocratic politics and human rights violations. Although ASEAN still officially upholds the norm of noninterference in domestic affairs, political violence against citizens can make state officials distrustful of each other. ASEAN's unprecedented approach to Myanmar, as discussed earlier, poses a serious challenge to regional unity building. In short, there is a correlation between the democratic regimes of states on the two Western continents and a growing irrelevance of territoriality.

[9] Findings from the ASEAN Secretariat's 2021 surveys show that 19% of people in the region never heard about ASEAN and 76% lacked a basic understanding of the organization.

As will be discussed next, undemocratic Asian states' unwillingness or inability to accept anyone among them as their legitimate regional community leader further displays their mutual distrust.

Why Democratic Leadership Also Matters

Although liberal institutionalists tend to place emphasis the significant role of regional organizations and constructivists tend to view collective norms or identities as binding states together, this article shows that democratic leadership remains the other key variable explaining why states are unlikely to succeed in moving progressively toward the second phase of security community: ascendance. A closer look at ASEAN and China shows why neither Southeast Asia nor Northeast Asia will not grow into an ascendant security community: not only are nine out of the ten ASEAN members undemocratic but none of them has emerged as the regional leader. China may be trying to lead Northeast or East Asia, but its dictatorial regime limits its potential.

Neo-classical realism offers a glimpse into the way regions can become communities. Robert Gilpin (2000) in particular offers some rich insight into the way the European Union has developed. The Union may not have integrated to the extent that it has if both France and Germany had not played the central role in the process of European integration. The two dominant European powers built a political alliance that propelled "the movement toward European unity, especially since the 1978 agreement to establish the European Monetary System (EMS)/Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM)" (p. 198). They also "desired a greater European presence on the world scene" and "believed that the foundations of peace and stability would be strengthened by the single market" (Gilpin, 2000, p. 198). Other realists such as Nicholas Khoo (2004, p. 37) are also correct when reminding social constructivists of what Karl Deutsch said about the role of American hegemony in helping to build the European security community. More can be said about the North American community. The United States is not the only superpower in the world but also the dominant power in North America. Canada has been dependent on both the US economy (as some 75% of Canadian exports go to the United States) and American security leadership in the context of NATO and North American Aerospace Defense Command. But not discussed in the work of these realists is the fact that France, Germany, and the United States are powerful regional democratic leaders. France and Germany were powerful democracies and willing to reconcile in their joint effort to help transform Western Europe into a regional community. The American preponderance of power "facilitated a certain kind of trust, one that would have been more difficult to come by had Canada been more powerful" (Shore, 1998, p. 344).

But none of the ASEAN states has been able to play a role similar to that of France and Germany in Europe or the United States in North America. During the late 1980s, Indonesia was ASEAN's *de facto* leader able to take the lead in trying to resolve the Cambodia war, though unsuccessfully, but has since been unable to play this role effectively. As one scholar puts it, "Such regional leadership no longer exists, and arguably ASEAN is the weaker for it" (Ganesan, n.d., p. 121). A social constructivist, Amitav Acharya (2021), while emphasizing the role of socialization and collective identity building, observes that the current government in Jakarta "has seemingly downgraded Indonesia's leadership role in ASEAN" and warns that "ASEAN can ill-afford to lose a proactive Indonesian role" as "a thought leader" (p. 132). What he does not explain is the fact that Indonesia is neither an economic power capable of pulling the other nine ASEAN members together nor a powerful democratic leader because the latter are undemocratic and evidently do not want to be led.

Firstly, Indonesia has not been powerful enough to provide effective regional economic leadership. Although it is one of the 20 largest economies (the 16th largest in the world, to be precise, the largest in Southeast Asia, and a member of the G20), Indonesia has never been in a real position to lead other ASEAN states. There are several reasons. It is not even the regional leader in terms of implementing free trade agreements. If assessed in terms of the number of free trade agreements it has already signed, the country still falls behind both Malaysia and Singapore and has not even implemented all of the existing free trade agreements[10]. Its imports from other ASEAN countries are less than its exports to them. Although the period of 2005 to 2017 saw the decline of Indonesia's exports to other ASEAN countries to a negative number or deficit as imports were growing larger than exports (Rotinsulu, Sumual, & Kumaat, 2019), the Indonesian markets have not absorbed imports from other ASEAN countries in any significant way. According to one study, "the expansion of Indonesian trade with trading partners" shows "that [its] imports grew faster than exports," but "[o]nly with ASEAN partners did Indonesia report more exports than imports in value terms, while, with China and East Asia, it reported smaller export growth" (Purwono, Sugiharti, Handoyo, & Esquivias, 2022). Other ASEAN states, moreover, have found markets for their exports in countries other than Indonesia. Take Cambodia as an example. According to a report,

> Total exports to the European Union, Cambodia's biggest market, rose by percent last year to top $4 billion. Strong growth was also recorded in exports to Japan, increasing by 45 percent to $827 million, and China, rising by 50 percent to $609 million. (Sokkorng, 2017, *The Phnom Penh Post*, March 21, 2017)

In contrast, the total volume of Cambodian exports to Indonesia has been miniscule: only US $34.43 in 2020[11].

Secondly, the lack of Indonesia's economic leadership within ASEAN has also allowed its members to follow extra-regional powers both willing and capable of dividing rather than uniting them as members of a community. Four ASEAN members—Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam—dispute China's territorial claim over the South China Sea, but the other six members are not fully united in their stand against China because of their different interests. One of China's main adversaries in the 1980s, for instance, Cambodia has now become China's most loyal client state in the region. This ASEAN member would now rather do business with China than with other ASEAN members, because the latter have done much less to help Cambodia prosper economically. International trade volumes alone, however, do not single-handedly determine Cambodia's foreign policy behavior otherwise the country would have developed closer relations with Japan, the European Union, and the United States. Although Cambodia's bilateral trade relations with China still rank third (behind Japan), China has in recent years emerged as Cambodia's largest investor. China's massive investment in Cambodia and Laos is a growing material incentive for the two ASEAN members to lean more on Beijing than on ASEAN and to do less to help strengthen ASEAN unity. From 1994 to 2016, China's total investment in Cambodia was worth about $14.7 billion. In 2015, some 75% of all foreign direct investment ($1.7 billion) came from outside ASEAN, and China's total investment was the biggest ($860 million). The biggest ASEAN investors were Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam, but each of them invested only about 2% of the $1.7 billion. All this goes to show that ASEAN investments in Cambodia were much smaller, when compared to China's. In 2016, China also emerged as the biggest investor in Laos, reaching over $1 billion

[10] Trading Economics: Cambodian Exports to Indonesia. https://visiglobal.co.id/cantingnews/indonesia–free–trade–agreement–is–still–under–other–asean–countries/2021/11/.
[11] https://tradingeconomics.com/cambodia/exports/indonesia.

compared to $88.9 million in 2015, replacing the country's patron (Vietnam) which saw its investment dropped by $4.5 million to $466 million (J&C Group, 2017). This does not mean ASEAN is no longer important to Cambodia and Laos, but it points to the limits of what the regional organization without a strong leader can do to help its poor members develop economically.

Thirdly, the ASEAN approach remains anti-hegemonic. The ASEAN members even reject the idea that wealthy members (such as Singapore) should contribute more funds to the ASEAN Secretariat than poor members and this policy position sheds light on the general weakness of this regional body. The principle of state sovereignty and the norms of non-interference in domestic affairs and consensus-based decision-making are among the factors that have inhabited any member state from providing effective regional leadership. Outside Southeast Asia, ASEAN's anti-hegemonic politics can be explained in terms of its engagement with extra-regional powers as a way to prevent any of them from becoming regionally dominant. The regional organization has also engaged with powerful states outside the region by taking the lead in establishing regional organizations, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the ASEAN-Plus-Three Grouping (APT), and the East Asian Summit (EAS). The ARF members, for instance, included Cold-War foes: namely, China, Russia, and the United States. These regional arrangements are institutionally weak but operate in a way similar to that of ASEAN in that none of the powerful members can play a dominant role. Powerful members like China, Japan, Russia, and the United States do not have any veto power the way the Permanent Members of the UN Security Council have, but neither does any of them have the power to provide effective leadership. Constructivists like Amitav Acharya (2021) observe that "the modern states of Southeast Asia…have rejected great power hegemony from Western or Asian nations in the post–Second War period…" (p. 129).

By not allowing any state to play an effective leadership role in their midst, the ASEAN states not only remain fragmented but also allow extra-regional states to pull them in different directions. China and the United States in particular have done this. By allowing the United States to engage in the region, Indonesia's regional leadership has been weakened (Chang, 2016, p. 341). Moreover, the struggle for power or influence over Southeast Asia between the two world powers is unlikely to recede in the foreseeable future. There is a tendency of economically and militarily rising powers to become more assertive, aggressive, and even expansionistic. As China grew economically, its newfound wealth has allowed it to pursue the policy of military modernization. Political realists are not totally incorrect when making the observation that China's rise is unpeaceful (Mearsheimer, 2001; 2006). The United States has done more or less the same when seeking to expand its sphere of influence, most notably in the Caribbean and generally the Western world (Kaplan, 2014). If the extra-regional great power dynamics remains unmitigated, ASEAN might splinter along the line of pro-China and pro-US positions—similar to the division during the Cold War: pro-Soviet and pro-US.

Fourthly and most importantly, Indonesia's democratic leadership role has not been strong enough to pull the other members along. Domestic politics plays an important role in preventing its government from effectively leading ASEAN on the foreign policy front. The pro-ASEAN group in the country has been dominated by the economic and political elites, which include government officials who have sought to promote ASEAN-first foreign policy and the pro-liberalization group, but the government has faced difficulty implementing free trade agreements. The nationalists have stood in the way of Indonesia providing effective economic leadership. Their domestic group consists of New Order's nationalist bureaucrats, politicians, civil society organizations, academics, and oligarchs (Syarip, 2020). Moreover, the authoritarian regimes,

particularly those in Myanmar, Thailand, and the Philippines[12] (Jones, 2008, p. 743), have rendered Indonesia's leadership ineffective, especially when seeking to defend democracy. President Joko Widodo, for instance, gave his foreign minister the task of helping to end the political crisis in Myanmar, but little has been accomplished. In April 2022, Myanmar's ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi was given a prison term of five years for corruption, in addition to six years' imprisonment in other cases. She still faces 10 more corruption charges (Blackwell, 2022).

Without Indonesia's effective economic and democratic leadership role in ASEAN, the regional organization is unlikely to function well as a regional security community because states in Southeast Asia are unlikely to stand united against China's growing regional hegemony. If the lack of "compliance" with regional norms and rules as well as the problem of "non-binding consensus" has hindered the process of regional integration in ASEAN, as David Martin Jones (2008, p. 755) suggests, then the question is why.

The proposition that democratic leadership at the regional level also matters can be further validated by the fact that China's rising economic and military power will not be enough to lead East Asia in the process of building a regional security community. Evidently, Beijing is taking steps to make this vision a reality. Zhexin Zhang (2019), for instance, argues that the weakening of a US-led hegemonic security order in the Asia-Pacific has prevailed since the end of the Cold War but "seems to be giving way to a more pluralistic and complex order, which in turn triggers growing concern from regional countries" (Zhang, 2019, p. 2). This trend, if it continues, will make it possible for China to step in by providing leadership to foster an "Asia-Pacific Security Community" without seeking to replace the current regional order and by taking "an incremental approach" to "shape" it. The Chinese approach relies on "closer political consultation and more integrated economic and social development among regional countries" based on its 2002 "New Security Concept" and more recently its 2014 "New Asian Security Concept". Underlining this approach is a set of norms, principles, and procedures, most notably the principle of sovereignty, equality, and cooperation, mutual trust and benefit, as well as collective decision-making (Zhang, 2019, pp. 11, 12). The Chinese model remains not only state-centric but also bound by the notion of developmental statism and undemocratic leadership as the basis for regional community building.

While the Chinese vision is in the right direction, the reality on the ground is quite different. Zhexin Zhang's line of reasoning—based on the general assumption that China does not want to repeat what the United States has done in the region—raises serious empirical questions. Little evidence shows that China has been effective in integrating states in the region into an economic community. Evidently, according to Zhang, "China is trying to draw regional countries onto its 'express train of development,' consolidating the economic as well as emotional basis for an Asia-Pacific security community", but "regional economic integration processes as the China-Japan-South Korea free trade zone (FTZ) and the ASEAN-plus-X (10 + X) are losing momentum amid lingering security tensions between China and some regional countries" (Zhang, 2019, p. 13).

Nor has China been effective in terms of translating any economic integration into political integration. Take relations between China and Taiwan as an example. Economic relations between the two Chinese states have deepened, but efforts by Beijing to reunify with Taiwan have so far failed. One major obstacle to political reunification is the fact that China is a dictatorship and Taiwan is a democracy. Although political reunification

[12] When still democratic, Thailand and the Philippines supported Indonesia's efforts to promote human rights and democracy in ASEAN.

between China and Taiwan may be a much more challenging process than regional community building, there are good reasons for thinking that China will not be recognized as the regional leader capable of inspiring other democratic states like Japan and South Korea to build a regional security community. Japan has in fact joined three other major democracies—Australia, India, and the United States—in the new security initiative known as Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), apparently to constrain China or even balance its growing power.

Evidence further shows that the Quad has the potential to grow stronger overtime because of American democratic leadership. In September 2021, for instance, President Biden hosted the first-ever in-person Leaders' Summit of the Quad and the four democratic state leaders "reiterated their commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific region that is 'undaunted by coercion'" (Choudhury, 2021, *CNBC*). "The United States," according to Congressional Research Service, "has urged greater coordination with other US partners, particularly Japan, in confronting" not only North Korea's "threats" but also "countering China's military" (Congressional Research Service, 2022, p. 2). Though not yet a Quad member, South Korea still maintains a bilateral security alliance with the United States and its "President-elect Yoon has promised to improve ties with Japan, and to seek to participate in and perhaps eventually join the Quad" (Congressional Research Service, 2022, p. 2). As one of the most stable democracies in the Asia-Pacific, South Korea has been more amicable toward China, but the threat of North Korea is the reason why Seoul cannot afford to adopt an anti-China position. But nowhere can one find evidence to show that Seoul is now ready to accept China's regional leadership for community building.

Will democratic and undemocratic states in the region eventually follow China? Although no one can come up with a clear answer to this difficult question, it is possible that this might happen if and when the decline of the United States makes it more likely for China to play a more dominant role in the region, but there will be no genuine regional security community. What is clear is that a Chinese hegemon will still be unable to transform the region into a security community for one simple reason: the United States, even at the height of its power as the world's only hegemon, failed to transform the region into a security community, as most states were undemocratic. There is still much distrust in what the Chinese leadership has said, as pointed out by Zhexin Zhang himself: "regional countries remain wary of China not only because of its rapidly growing military power, but also due to the frequent gaps between its policy statements and its actual behavior" (Congressional Research Service, 2022, p. 14). China's pacifist rhetoric has been contradicted by its assertive territorial claims and ambitions to be a global power. The leadership in Beijing may have recently learned from some past mistakes and appears to refrain itself from aggressively turning the country into a regional hegemon or striving for regional leadership, but it remains unclear that it has done so successfully. For instance, China did not recognize the rulings of an international arbitration in favor of the Philippines over their territorial disputes but then later softened its defiance. But it was neither Chinese pacifism nor international law that made a difference, which occurred only after Manila under a new administration chose to work more cooperatively with Beijing, which also knew that its aggression would only motivate the Philippines to move closer to the United States. The Philippines remains concerned about the rise of China and its territorial ambitions, especially after the latter had adopted a coast guard law that allows its military to "take all necessary measures" against any intruders. China agrees in principle with other states in the region about the need to adopt a code of conduct (CoC) to manage territorial disputes but still pushes for a non-binding one against the position taken by other states that insist any code adopted be binding. No progress has been made and the South China Sea remains a dangerous flashpoint.

A 2021 survey on the State of Southeast Asia, conducted by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, also reached this conclusion: China is the most influential but most distrusted power among the following major powers: Japan, the European Union, the United States, and India (Seah, Ha, Martinus, & Thao, 2021, p. 52). Why China has been regarded as the most distrusted power in the region may have many reasons, but the rise of this dictatorship is the most important one. Neither the growing size of Chinese power nor its official communist ideology is the principal source of other states' distrust. If power were the main source of distrust, the United States—not China—would be the most distrusted state in the region. If communism were the main source, only noncommunist states would find China most distrustful; however, neither North Korea nor Vietnam, for that matter, shows any signs of real trust in their giant neighbor. Take Sino-Vietnamese relations as a case in point. Even though they are officially and politically socialist, China and Vietnam are far from becoming allies. Their war in February 1979 serves a reminder that the long history of Chinese domination over Vietnam has not made the latter willing and able to forge a close alliance with China. As shown earlier, Vietnam has moved closer to the United States than to China, when assessed in security and military terms.

Why China is rated as the least trusted power in Southeast Asia can be further explained by the majority worries not only about its growing economic and political influence as well as its military power but also about the potential of China using its growing influence and power to threaten their states' interests and sovereignty. Although Beijing has consistently maintained its commitment to defending the principle of state sovereignty and other international norms such as noninterference and nonaggression, China was viewed as a revisionist power (by 46.3 percent of the respondents), as gradually taking over the US role as a regional leader (by 31.5 percent of them), and as too eager to determine China's strategic intentions at this moment (by 15.1 percent of them). Only 5.6 percent saw China as a status quo power supporting the existing regional order and only 1.5 percent regarded it as a benign and benevolent power (Seah et al., 2021, p. 52). If forced to align itself with one of the two most powerful strategic rivals, the majority of the respondents said ASEAN would choose the United States (53.6% in 2020; 61.5% in 2021) over China (46.4% in 2020; 38.5% in 2021) (Seah et al., 2021, p. 33). The respondents that had the highest levels of distrust in China include one democratic state (Indonesia at 60.5%) and undemocratic states (Philippines at 82.1%, Vietnam at 75.4%, Thailand at 67.9%, and Myanmar at 59.6%) (Seah et al., 2021, p. 42). The respondents in democratic and undemocratic states alike rated China as untrustworthy. Even though Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar have become increasingly dependent on China, none of them feels comfortable enough to follow Chinese leadership unquestionably. Cambodia's dependence on China has deepened, but this ASEAN state shows no unquestionable loyalty to Beijing. The Cambodian government, for instance, co-sponsored a UN resolution that condemned the Russian aggression against Ukraine, despite Soviet support for Phnom Penh throughout the 1980s and China's failure to call Russia out (Geovalin, 2022).

One important source of distrust toward China displayed by states in Asia is the fact that it is a powerful dictatorship. Neither Taiwan nor any other democracy in the region trusts the Chinese rhetoric about its peaceful rise. As the world's most powerful democracy in decline, the United States appears to distrust the world's most powerful dictatorship and can also use its influence to make other states distrustful of China. Aaron Friedberg's (2011) point about the Chinese political regime may reveal a general perception among people and policymakers, especially those in the democratic world: "if we permit an illiberal China to displace us as the preponderant player in this most vital region," he argues, "we will face grave dangers to our interests

and our values throughout the world" (p. 8). Although he thinks that neither democracy nor regional democratic leadership matters, Amitav Achara (2021) also makes this observation: "The counter-vailing military and economic presence of the US, India, Japan, and other Western nations will further stifle any Chinese efforts to impose a sphere of influence" (p. 129).

The 2021 survey on the State of Southeast Asia further reveals something interesting and supportive of this article's theoretical proposition: the region's most trusted major power is Japan (as indicated by 67.1% of the respondents), followed by the European Union (51.0%), the United States (43.3%), India (19.8%), and China (16.5%). This is clear: the most and more trusted powers as perceived by the respondents are the democratic states but the least trusted power is a powerful dictatorship. The survey further reveals that the four major democratic powers are more trustworthy than China because they are regarded as more responsible in terms of their role in upholding the international liberal order based on a number of pillars: international law, the rule of law, global governance, free trade, sustainability, and climate change. The fact that powerful democracies are not equally trustworthy also appears to indicate that they are not perceived as equally capable of upholding the liberal pillars. While regional democratic leadership matters, domestic politics in democratic states also matters. The US leadership in North America raised questions about whether the region would persist as a security community following Donald Trump's election to office in November 2016 because of his nationalist politics (Greaves, 2020). The United States' positive rate was lower than that those of Japan and the European Union apparently because of the Trump administration's declining global leadership, but a more positive rate (a jump by 18 percent in 2021 from 30.3 percent in 2020) may have to do with the expectations that the Biden administration would be less nationalistic than its predecessor[13] (Seah et al., 2021, p. 52; Acharya, 2021, p. 126).

Conclusion

Evidence presented in this article shows that some states in Asia continue to display their collective aspiration to form a regional security community but have yet to move far beyond policy rhetoric. Upon closer examination of the role of ASEAN and China in their respective regions, at least two major obstacles still prevent them from turning their shared vision into reality. The majority of states in this broad region are undemocratic. The lack of regional leadership by Indonesia (as the only but weak democratic state in ASEAN) and the limits of China (the powerful dictatorship in the region) in providing regional leadership further reveal a serious obstacle to regional efforts in trying to build a viable regional security community. The contrast between the Asian and Western regions—Europe and North America where all states are democratic with powerful democratic leaders—could not be starker. Democratic states, especially those led by liberal democrats (rather than nationalists), are more willing and able to tolerate and trust each other. They can also accept the most powerful members as their leaders. In contrast, states governed by undemocratic leaders or dictators do not display the same level of tolerance and mutual trust. They may aspire to build a regional security community, but their policy measures still rest on the need to control their own populations and national borders through coercive means. High defence spending and the absence of border demilitarization are some of the major indicators.

[13] Amitav Acharya offers a similar insight: "The perceptions in ASEAN of the US as a declining power and an unreliable security provider increased rapidly in the past decade. Some of these perceptions are not new, but they might have been aggravated by the general foreign policy approach of the Trump administration, including its disdain for multilateralism."

The following theoretical proposition—based on a distinct theoretical perspective called "democratic realism"—can still be subject to further empirical testing: *the building and maintenance of a regional security community is what democratic governments and the most powerful democracy make of it*. This proposition is based on the unique assumption that democratic governments (not only democratic states) and the most powerful democracies are most effective in terms of their collective ability to form a security community and over time transform it into a mature one. A regional security community needs not based on the assault on state sovereignty, nor will it be too weak to stand up to powerful states like China as some realists suggest. The members of such a community do not threaten to go war against each other, but neither do they stand idly by in the midst of powerful extra-regional threats. Neither the European and North-American security communities succumbed to the Soviet threat during the Cold War, nor will they do anything different if China were to pose an existential threat to them. The above proposition also reveals the limits of liberal and social constructivist perspectives in their silence on the role of powerful democratic leadership but can still be criticized for being "top-down" or "elitist". Overall, this kind of criticism still rests more on normative theorizing than empirical analysis[14] (Chang, 2016). The emancipationist vision may be desirable in its call for the removal of all constraints on human freedom but may end up taking us back to the Hobbesian state of nature where the war of everyone against everyone is the norm. One cannot just explain away the problem of power with the intense security dynamics still in full display, especially in Asia where realism is making a comeback with the resurgence of great power politics (Peou, 2022).

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[14] The author acknowledges the problem of realizing this type of community in these words, "the critical security community, can be said to be such a utopian and unattainable concept that it is worthless as it lacks analytical value in the real world. However, it is precisely its comprehensive idealness that gives it true value, serving as an ideal type to commit towards in the process of emancipation," pp. 353-354.

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