

ASEAN's Resilient Soft Power in Building Peace and Shaping Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Soft power is a concept introduced by Professor Joseph Nye about the ability of actors in international relations to achieve what they want through the use of attraction and persuasion instead of coercion or bribery. The term is now widely used by analysts and politicians around the world. However, most studies on soft power focus on countries, especially developed Western countries, rather than developing non-Western countries, communities, groups, international or regional organizations, which have also created positive influences in international relations in many diverse forms and ways. In the context of fierce globalization and regionalization, ASEAN is an interesting case that has created compelling successes in soft power as a cohesive community. The study will examine and evaluate the significance of ASEAN's integration process in creating the power of attraction in the international arena, towards creating peace and sustainable development. At the same time, building the soft power of the community is also an opportunity for member countries to enhance their position and influence, with a typical example can be considered as Vietnam. Studying about ASEAN soft power will help us understand the nature of the community's strength, in the diversity of political - cultural - economic - social conditions, thereby contributing to further understanding the nature of soft power in international relations.

Keywords: *Soft Power, Asean, Southeast Asia, Vietnam, Regional Integration.*

Introduction

In the early years of the 21st century, the balance of power has begun to shift from the West to the East, with the Indo-Pacific region, the confluence of two great oceans: the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean (Deb and Wilson, 2021). It is also home to a number of rising powers, including China, India, Japan, South Korea and The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). For ASEAN, this is a regional organization consisting of ten dynamic countries with a population of over 670 million people that is gradually asserting its position as a promising Community of importance in the region (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023). Many predictions have been made about the attractiveness of this region with the potential it has from politics - economics - culture - society to create a certain balance of force with Asian powers (Police Strategic Research Institute, 2020, pp.159-162). ASEAN's strength can be identified as soft power, characterized by attraction and persuasion rather than deterrence and bribery. Soft power is a quite popular term in modern international relations, introduced by Harvard University Professor Joseph Nye, referring to the ability of subjects to exert their influence on the country through their values, policies and culture (Nye, 2004, pp.11-15). For the ASEAN Community, building soft power is important when this region is somewhat absent of influence from deterrent hard power elements such as the military. In the context of globalization and regionalization taking place strongly, through connection and cooperation between countries in the region to maintain peace and increase common interests, ASEAN is a case that has created certain successes in soft power. The study will examine and evaluate the significance of ASEAN's integration and cohesion process in creating the power of attraction in the international arena, especially in creating peace and sustainable development of the region. Constructing the soft power of the community is also an opportunity for member countries to enhance their position and influence, with a typical case to be examined as Vietnam. Learning about ASEAN's soft power will help to partly understand the nature of the community's power and influence, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the rich nature of soft power in international relations which is a lively and multi-dimensional discussion.

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ASEAN - A Region That Was Once Underestimated in Terms of Soft Power

Referring to ASEAN, many people compare the region to the Balkans of Asia, implying the risk of division and conflict coming from many factors such as economic, political, cultural, ethnic and religious differences (Oishi, 2016). ASEAN member states include an extremely diverse region with distinct governance models (democracy, dictatorship, military government...), where some of the world's major religions converge. (Islam, Buddhism and Christianity), and stratified economies from wealthy countries (Singapore) to some of the poorest (Myanmar). It can be said that ASEAN is almost a laboratory of coexistence of diversity and differences from politics, economics, society, to culture.

In addition to facing this internal heterogeneity, ASEAN also faces many challenges in traditional and non-traditional security issues such as territorial tensions in the South China Sea; issues of welfare, natural disasters, environment, etc... to the increasing power competition between China and the United States in the region (Shambaugh, 2021). Many predictions are made that ASEAN will falter in the face of rising geopolitical tensions in the region (Mahbubani & Sng., 2017, pp.16-24). With its loose operating mechanism, ASEAN could have fractured and disintegrated before the difficulties that emerged, however, this community has steadily overcome challenges to bring many positive outcomes in helping improve the welfare of 670 million people. With persistent and steady operations, ASEAN has quietly sought to bring peace and economic growth to Southeast Asia, thereby helping to maintain the global multilateral trade order. The most important thing is that this region had no war or serious conflict during the late 20th - early 21st century. ASEAN has not experienced any air battles like the one between India and Pakistan in South Asia in February 2019 or current military attacks like the one between Russia and Ukraine.

According to Kishore Mahbubani (2022), Singaporean diplomat and geopolitical advisor, President of the United Nations Security Council from 2001 to 2002, ASEAN consistently and quietly brought peace and stability for one of the most “Balkanized” regions in the world. ASEAN economies continue to grow steadily. World media reported that India had surpassed China to become the world's fastest growing major economy, and in fact ASEAN grew faster than India in 2019 (Mahbubani, 2022, p.77). ASEAN is a region that is sometimes overlooked for its potential and overshadowed by Asian dragons and tigers such as China, India, Japan, South Korea, etc...However, in recent years, ASEAN has emerged as a dynamic and rapidly growing economic hub, demonstrating resilience in the face of unprecedented challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Asian Development Bank, ASEAN is one of the fastest growing regions in the world by 2023 with a forecast growth rate of 4.6%, better than the 1.1% rate of the United States, 0.5% of the Eurozone and 0.6% of Japan (Rasjid, 2023). ASEAN is now already the world's 5th largest economy with a total GDP of 3 trillion USD (Septiari, 2019).

ASEAN's soft power has been much underrated, but it still occurs silently as quiet soft power, and few people pay attention (Blankert, 2014). With more than five decades of establishment and operation, it is time for us to look back and make appropriate assessments of the stature and contribution of this organization in the big picture of regional as well as global geopolitics. So what will be the factors that create the “soft” success of this community, which Mahbubani (2017) did not hesitate to call a “miracle” of our modern world?

- *Asean - Soft Power from Within Is Affirmed Through Regional Cohesion for Peace, Stability and Development*

According to Joseph Nye (2004), one of the basic currencies of soft power comes from the political value of a country or organization. Nye (2004, p.8) emphasizes that “in international politics, the resources that produce soft power arise in large part from the values an organization or country expressed in its culture, in the examples it sets by its internal practices and policies, and in the way it handles its relations with others”. Thus, an organization with a stable, transparent political structure, oriented towards respectable values for the security and sustainable development of the community can build soft power through trust,

credibility and prestige for its members as well as for partners outside the organization. For ASEAN, the establishment of an Association aimed at peace, stability and regional socio-economic development with a clear and transparent political organizational structure is the first source of the bloc's soft power. Achieving this is not a one-day story but a long-term and continuous development process with many adjustments and changes to adapt to new contexts as well as specific conditions of the region and each member state.

If we look back at its history, it can be said that this process took place with many hardships and obstacles. The formation of this community was not smooth or favorable and encountered many disagreements among members, and there were even difficult periods that made the belief in the cohesion of the Community shaken. (Mahbubani and Sng., 2017, p.46). ASEAN was founded in the 1960s, a tense period of the Cold War when conflicts in ideology and interests occurred not only around the world but even in Southeast Asia (Eccleston, Dawson, McNamara, 1998, p.311). ASEAN at that time included five pro-American countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. The political purpose of the organization was to prevent the influence and development of Communism in Southeast Asia. Within the Association itself, although they were allies, the member countries did not really share a common consensus on viewpoints and development orientation. Indonesia aimed to become a leading country in the region, while Malaysia and Singapore wanted to restrain this ambition through the Association's cooperation framework (Alagappa, 1998, p.107). Meanwhile, some other countries in Southeast Asia were on different front lines in terms of ideology and levels of development.

After the end of the Cold War, the ideological conflict ended and was replaced by a strong process of global cooperation taking place in many fields. This process of dynamic global connectivity increased strong competition between countries, and this made it impossible for small countries to establish their position and voice in isolation on the international stage. In Southeast Asia, most countries were middle-power countries or lower, some countries were even in a state of poverty and lagging behind. These were the limitations that these countries were aware of. Thus, choosing cohesion, with geographical - cultural - historical proximity, was a reasonable starting way to help members in the Southeast Asia region connect, thereby enhancing their strength. Inheriting the historical foundation, in the 1990s ASEAN continued to develop in a new direction, consistent with the contemporary context of the world and the region. From five members, the number of countries joining ASEAN increased rapidly. Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia respectively joined the Association in 1995, 1997, and 1999, bringing the total number of Association members to 10, including most Southeast Asian countries (ASEAN, 2023).

Geographic proximity is the initial pretext for union, but it is the sharing of common values among members that is the most determining factor for long-term cohesion. ASEAN builds the Community based on three pillars of value: politics, economics and culture, aiming for a strong and harmonious community. "Harmony", that is the balanced connection between the inside and the outside, is probably one of the most basic and highly respected values in Asia generally, and Southeast Asia particularly (Trompenaars; Woolliams, 2020, pp.213-233). The value system of "Harmony" is conveyed and clearly stated in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia signed at the 1st ASEAN Summit in Indonesia in 1976 (Council on Foreign relations Editors, 2023). This treaty embodies the foundational principles of the ASEAN's Way including mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity of all countries; the right of every State to maintain its national existence without hindrance from outside interference, sabotage, or coercion; not interfere in each other's internal affairs; resolve differences or disputes by peaceful means; renounce the threat or use of violence; and cooperate effectively with each other (Acharya, 2009, pp.54-98).

Today, ASEAN, from a poor and divided region, has become a dynamic and united region of development (Dang, 2021, pp.48-75). The establishment of ASEAN satisfied firstly the expectation of the member countries in the region, which was the harmonious solidarity to create stability and increase development in many aspects. The formation of ASEAN towards cohesion and creation of regional security is the premise for the emergence of the community's soft power, and in the future it will benefit global security and development (Gates, Mya Than, 2001, pp.26-44).

In the past, ASEAN's role in maintaining stability and peace in the region was underestimated by Europe and the United States, but today this view has changed as Brussels and Washington are both aware of the importance of the organization (Blankert, 2014). The EU acknowledges that the Association shares with the EU the mission of a “peace making organization” in the region with an important stabilizing and balancing role in Southeast Asia, and facing competition between the United States and China, India, Russia and other countries. The organization's role as a protective shield is extremely important for smaller countries in the region.

If there are some comparisons with the EU, we can see that ASEAN has also created significant meanings in the cohesion of countries in the region. For the EU, the creation of the Union is important to help this community create stability, build peace while increasing its balance power with superpowers such as the United States, Japan, China or India (Bui, 2018, pp.126-169). For ASEAN, its economic and military strength as well as its international political role are not equal to the EU's, but they have built an important geopolitical position by being located at an important exchange gateway in the Indo-Pacific region, and this area is closely related to major powers such as China, India, Japan, Australia as well as the United States.

After 57 years of establishment, ASEAN has gradually formed its reputation and shown great attraction to countries in the region. This has created motivation for the governments of member countries to make efforts to reform and adjust policies to suit the common interests and requirements of the Community. The economic, security, political, cultural, and social benefits are what these countries are estimated to receive when they participate in the Community. According to Bui Thanh Son (2023), Minister of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam, the ASEAN community has formed, developed strongly and now is ready to become a central force in regional connectivity processes.

- *ASEAN - Soft Power Looks Outward Through the Spreading Values and Expanding Connections*

From ensuring peace and security within the bloc, ASEAN is promoting and spreading its positive values outside, expressed in many essential fields such as politics, diplomacy, economics and non-traditional security.

First, the foreign policy value system that ASEAN focuses on constructing and spreading is the way of connection based on mutual trust and respect, with principles of multilateralism and international law as the foundation. ASEAN looks outward through peaceful dialogue, understanding and respect for partners, thereby building mutual prestige and credibility (Kotler, Kartajaya, Huan, 2010, pp.83-91). ASEAN always aims to resolve disputes multilaterally, advocates non-violence, and military interventions, if any, are always based on regional consensus and, most importantly, with the approval of the United Nations (Weissmann, 2010). These are the basic values that ASEAN always respects and it is also the way ASEAN has made a good of behaving in international relations that many countries in the world aspire to.

Specifically, in resolving the South China Sea dispute, ASEAN has made a good impression by cooperation, refusal to use violence, multilateral agreements and reliance on international law, and enlisting the support of the international community through transparent official information (Vietnam, 2023). Although the dialogues between ASEAN members and China in recent times have been quite dramatic, ASEAN still maintains a constructive relationship with its giant neighbor. ASEAN's approach to the problem is considered moderate, proactive and strictly respects international law. Therefore, when talking about ASEAN's strength, it is difficult to think about the deterrent power of artillery shells or guns, but ASEAN has built the image and reputation of an organization aiming at common security and careful conflict management. Of course, the story of the South China Sea dispute is not yet over. However, the behavior of Southeast Asian countries has received support from the world and is the next step for them to assert their legitimate interests as well as future regional cooperation agreements. ASEAN is considered wise when it clearly distinguishes between conflicts of national and regional interests and opportunities for cooperation with superpowers (Tran, 2024, pp.284-299). The disagreement did not disrupt the relationship between ASEAN and its superpower neighbor as ASEAN-China cooperation continued in many fields and the two sides signed ambitious trade agreements.

Second, from the basis of dialogue and mutual respect as the foundation, ASEAN has gradually created the rules of the game when facing superpowers with the ASEAN-centered approach. In foreign policies, ASEAN leaders aim for diversity in thinking and approaches, focusing on stability and balance of power based on multilateralism, rather than concentrating power on one single nation (Ping, 2017, pp.134-287). For mid - range countries like ASEAN members, multilateralism is the most reasonable choice that they have been persistently pursuing (Teo, 2023). This also reflects the world trend, directing the resolution of international issues from unipolar to multipolar, based on many diverse voices in the international community.

Specifically, in the context of geopolitical competition, alliances have been established, such as the “Quad” including the United States, Japan, Australia and India. This is considered a potential strategic alliance of 'outside' powers without ASEAN's involvement (Vo, 2023, pp.291-308). Faced with this issue, ASEAN has clearly stated its stance through the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific”, considered an ASEAN-centred Indo-Pacific strategy that is more consistent with ASEAN's principles of inclusiveness (including towards China) and consensus-building, and its stress on a normative, political and diplomatic—rather than an excessively military—strategic—approach (Acharya, 2019). This approach has an essential meaning in the regional and international geopolitical picture by minimizing confrontations or conflicts between major powers, while increasing ASEAN's position as a neutral partner, trustworthy and able to take on the role of intermediary to connect and mediate the parties.

Third, from the foreign policy value system that centers on ASEAN, ASEAN has succeeded in expanding and increasing the number of connections with many countries. Major economic-political powers such as the United States, EU, China, South Korea, Japan, and India are constantly strengthening cooperation with ASEAN through mechanisms initiated by ASEAN such as ASEAN+1, ASEAN+ 3, East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+) (Hoang, 2008). This is one of the eloquent proofs of the appeal and attraction of this community. ASEAN has gradually affirmed its position as a pillar of peace, the epicenter of growth and the nucleus of dialogue and cooperation in the region and the world more broadly. With the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, after 47 years from the time of the first signing, in 2023 at the ASEAN-43 Summit, ASEAN countries witnessed the signing ceremony of the three countries to join the Treaty, which were Kuwait, Serbia and Panama, bringing the total number of Treaty members to 54, including many countries across 5 continents (ASEAN, 2023).

Fourth, geopolitical stability is a condition to ensure the attraction of international investment, turning Southeast Asia into a promising economic and financial center of the world. For Nye, although military or economics are often considered hard power, if used flexibly it can also create positive effects in creating attraction (Gomichon, 2013). Therefore, some analysts expand the concept of soft power to mention that economic attractiveness can also be seen as a factor that creates a nation's overall power (Mead, 2004, p.46). ASEAN's economic soft power is demonstrated specifically through increasing regional and global economic cooperation as this is a potential and very stable investment area. With an average annual economic growth rate of nearly 5%, along with political and social stability, it is the special attractive strength of ASEAN (Asian Development Bank, 2023). ASEAN with a market of over 670 million people and a young and dynamic population, if viewed as an entity, will be rated 5th in terms of economic strength (Septiari, 2019). ASEAN economic connections are constantly expanding, covering many areas, from trade, services to investment (Ishikawa, 2021, pp.24-41). In addition to the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) established in 1992, free trade networks with important partners in the region (FTA+1) such as China, Japan, Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand as well as with major powers such as the United States, Canada, EU, and Russia are also strongly reinforced. In the future, ASEAN aims to build an ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) towards a European-style common market by 2025 with such high cohesion and integration; competitive, inclusive, innovative, dynamic, people-oriented and people-centered characteristics; and a global ASEAN.

Fifth, in non-traditional security issues, ASEAN is an actor that plays an active role in solving regional problems. The issues such as the environment, pollution, resource depletion, poverty, combating terrorism, maritime security, natural disasters, epidemics, diseases, transnational crime, human development, gender equality development, etc.... were resolved effectively with the motto “Towards People-Oriented and People Centered” (Lim, Sun, Antoinette de Jesus, Soth, Ton, 2023, p.82). Regarding non-traditional security issues,

ASEAN's positive solutions and actions, indirectly, also contribute to the common picture of security and sustainable development of the world (Luu, 2021, pp.203-269).

In 2006, ASEAN was an observer to the United Nations General Assembly and a “dialogue partner” of the United Nations. Many co-operations to address possible effects from climate and environmental change were also carried out by ASEAN such as: Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ) in 1995; Agreement on ASEAN Transboundary Dust Pollution in 2002, the ASEAN-Wildlife Enforcement Network in 2005,...In 2007, in Cebu, ASEAN and EAS (Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea) issued the Cebu Declaration on East Asian Energy Security, to strengthen cooperation on energy security, sponsor alternative energy research of all kinds conventional fuel. Many important documents were also signed by ASEAN to create standards of conduct for relations not only between ASEAN countries, but also between ASEAN and external partners such as the ASEAN Declaration of Harmony in 1976; Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in 1976; Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in 2002 and ASEAN Charter in 2008.

Especially with the Covid 19 Pandemic, ASEAN countries have coordinated and shared resources to support and together overcome the pandemic (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2020). The organization has adopted the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework, which provided a comprehensive approach towards regional recovery, strengthening the region's health systems and enhancing regional connectivity, while also generating responses unified to restore member states. ASEAN has established the Covid-19 Response Fund to provide financial support to member states to help address the impact and current challenges of this epidemic.

- *The Soft Power of Asean and Its Member States: The Case of Vietnam Strengthening Its Soft Power Within the Community*

With the stable development of ASEAN, soft power is a story of “win-win” for the organization's members. According to the Global Soft Power Index 2023, ASEAN member countries are making positive improvements in soft power assessment indicators (Jagodzinski, 2023). Singapore is leading the way in soft power, as the country is a major financial center and a model of good governance for many countries in the region. In the world, Singapore ranks 21st. In Asia, Singapore is only behind Japan (4th), China (5th) and South Korea (15th) and ahead of India (28th). Other countries also have positive positions such as Malaysia (39th), Thailand (41st), Vietnam (44th) and Indonesia (45th), all in the global Top 50. Vietnam is an interesting case, when participating in ASEAN they gain positive benefits, while also being a dynamic contributor back to the community (Vietnam Times, 2021).

If we look back at Vietnam's history with ASEAN, it is a tumultuous process when Vietnam started out in a confrontational position with ASEAN because of ideological differences. Vietnam was a country devastated by war and the country's reintegration with the world began by joining ASEAN. This event had extremely important meaning after Vietnam implemented the 1986 Doi Moi policy. Vietnam's engagement with ASEAN was considered a breakthrough international political strategy when they shook hands with other neighbors who were on the other ideological side during the Cold War.

Vietnam became an official member of ASEAN on July 28, 1995, at the 28th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Conference. This was an important turning point, marking the end of a difficult period of ups and downs, helping Vietnam escape the embargo and opening a period of integration and development in Southeast Asia (Tongzon, 1999, pp.137-161). ASEAN was the gateway and key to Vietnam's regional and world integration process.

The process of joining ASEAN brings Vietnam important and practical benefits, including a peaceful and stable environment which is favorable for security and development, the enhancement of the country's position, and effective support for the implementation of the country's foreign policy (Thanh Tung, 2022).

In terms of politics and security, joining ASEAN helps Vietnam overcome economic encirclement and political isolation for a long time; put an end to division and confrontation in the region, from now on build relationships with Southeast Asian countries in the direction of friendship, stability and long-term, comprehensive and close cooperation both multilaterally and bilaterally (People, 2022).

In terms of economics, joining ASEAN helps Vietnam have a large market for exports to ASEAN member countries and the opportunity to access larger markets such as the United States, China, Japan, EU, ... Joining the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) supports Vietnam in implementing extensive and comprehensive economic cooperation with countries in the region and around the world such as participating in signing free trade agreements (FTAs) with the European Union (EU), Korea, and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (Gates, 2000, pp.7-43). The positive impact from the AEC motivates Vietnam to reform its economic institutions and improve shortcomings to ensure better compliance with international integration requirements.

In terms of society and people, participating in the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) helps Vietnam have the opportunity to increase communication, understanding, exchange, and learn about cultural values with the region as well as preserving and promoting the country's culture to the region, contributing to realizing Vietnam's foreign policy goal of being a friend and trusted partner of countries around the world (Luan, 2022). ASCC also helps Vietnam strengthen cooperation with regional countries in solving environmental and social issues, improving people's quality of life, bringing practical benefits to people; at the same time, it helps Vietnam mobilize resources as well as share information and experience in responding to and resolving transnational issues, in order to promote Vietnam's values of social progress as well as of the area.

From being a new member of ASEAN, Vietnam has become an active actor and dynamic participant in regional activities (Nguyen, 2010, pp.223-236). Vietnam became the rotating chair of ASEAN in 1998, 2010 and 2020 and has launched initiatives that contribute to the development of this region. Vietnam's initiatives, especially through the ASEAN Chairmanship terms, have left valuable assets for ASEAN, creating momentum to promote the process of building the Community further and stronger. Vietnam's success can become a role model of development for many developing countries (Thoburn, 2013). In particular, Vietnam's integration is also a driving force for countries such as Cambodia, Laos, or Myanmar to join ASEAN and shorten the development gap with countries in the region (Cuyvers, 2019).

Vietnam always consistently pursues the ASEAN's Way of operation. For example, with the South China Sea issues, Vietnam also takes advantage of the consensus of many countries in speaking out against China's actions of force. Of course, the inconsistencies of some countries in the region also partly affect the common voice of the whole community. But it can be seen that Vietnam has skillfully used ASEAN as a regional and international forum to raise issues and make their voices about concerns heard. With the progress that has been achieved, Hamada Kazuyuki (2022, pp.72-97), former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Japan, commented that Vietnam may become an important middle-range power in the region in the near future. Especially with the soft power potentials, this country also possesses positive resources that create attraction, as Nye (2007) admitted when he visited this country.

- *Challenges To ASEAN's Soft Power in The Coming Time*

From its initial inception and expansion of membership to its formalization with vision, ASEAN has indeed earned a reputation for maintaining regional peace and stability in Southeast Asia for more than five decades (Cuyvers, Chen, De Lombaerde, 2019). Despite its achievements, ASEAN still cannot avoid serious challenges in its development process (Lim, Sun, Antoinette de Jesus, Soth, Ton, 2023). ASEAN is still criticized for its consensus mechanism, ASEAN's progress is relatively slow and often faces obstacles due to internal and external conflicts.

In recent years, ASEAN has faced a series of enormous challenges, and indeed geopolitical and strategic factors have played an important role in the continued development of ASEAN itself. These challenges

include the South China Sea conflict, food and energy security, the political crisis in Myanmar, the global economic downturn, and growing competition between great powers like the United States and China (Wakkumbura, 2021). ASEAN has reached a crossroads where it must do more and accelerate to ensure resilience and relevance in shaping its own regional architecture. Policies and mechanisms to fully realize the ASEAN Community must be properly drafted with careful strategic thinking, effective implementation and meaningful evaluation.

In the coming time, ASEAN still has many opportunities to develop its soft power through cooperation towards common values and interests, based on the principles of multilateralism (Teo, 2020). This requires consensus from all the member states. The key issue is whether ASEAN countries are really aiming for consensus for the common good? At this point, the controversy over the national interests of Realism may still have its full weight. In 2012, an event showed that ASEAN's Achilles heel was that the Association failed to reach a common statement on the South China Sea issue after Cambodia refused to reach a consensus (Cambodianess, 2022). This was a critical concern about disagreements and divisions among the 10 ASEAN member countries in reaching a common compromise. However, from other angles, if we look at ongoing cooperative efforts, we can have more expectations. Activities to increase understanding between countries and people in the region are still going strong (Vietnam Times, 2020). From understanding comes sympathy. Soft power not only comes from political discourse and actions from the Top-down but is also carried out by the activities from the Bottom-Up, by the ASEAN citizens..

A factor that also needs to be noted is that ASEAN still lacks hard power to combine with soft power to create smart power, which is flexibility in the use of resources (Nye, 2009). They still lack a strong hard power structure from the military and common financial system. The common military power structure can help ensure security as well as resolve urgent conflict issues in the region. An economic system with a common currency is also a wish but quite far away. A common currency can unite the 10 ASEAN countries into a unified, large and diverse common market. This is what the EU has done successfully (Dinh, 2011, pp.88-108). For ASEAN, it is still a long way because the level of economic development among members is still quite different (Hew, 2023). The use of a common currency system will profoundly transform the economic structure of the members and will require a lot of effort to improve. Opportunities come with challenges like a difficult puzzle, but this is still an ideal for ASEAN to consider and needs determination.

Conclusion

- *A Recommendation of The Nobel Peace Prize for Asean?*

After 50 years of establishment, many challenges still remain, but ASEAN has built a relatively solid economic-political-cultural bond among its members. ASEAN is a community with cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity, living together in a stable and harmonious way (Acharya, 2013). ASEAN soft power through regional institutional-cultural-economic-political cohesion, although not as widespread and influential as the United States, China, India, EU, ...but they know how to promote its resources to build trust, reputation and credibility, therefore attract the global community. ASEAN scholar Amitav Acharya has called ASEAN “a durable regional grouping in the developing world”. With legitimacy in action, respect for diverse values and most importantly harmonious solidarity, ASEAN can build influence as a cohesive entity to bring benefits not only to the countries members but also for the security of the Indo-Pacific region. Disagreements and challenges may still be there, as is natural for all diverse and complex cooperation, but when ASEAN's cohesion works towards common goals, for peace and security, stability and sustainable development, the soft power values of the Association will promote their optimal points. In 2012, the EU received the Nobel Peace Prize for its contribution to regional development, perhaps it may be time for ASEAN to be considered for a similar award in the upcoming 60th anniversary of its tireless contributions as a catalyst for peace.

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