Making Sense of ‘ASEAN Way’: A Constructivist Approach

Taku Tamaki
School of Sociology, Politics, and Law
University of Plymouth
Drake Circus
Plymouth
Devon PL4 8AA
UNITED KINGDOM

E-mail: taku.tamaki@plymouth.ac.uk

10,407 words

Research for this article was conducted while I was Research Fellow in the Institute of Asian Cultural Studies, International Christian University, Tokyo.

Presented at the Annual Conference of the International Political Science Association in Fukuoka, Japan, 9-13 July 2006.

Draft Only: Comments Welcome
Making Sense of ‘ASEAN Way’: A Constructivist Approach

Abstract: The modus operandi of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—the so-called ‘ASEAN Way’—is often considered to be a nebulous concept centred on consensus and non-interference. While the students of International Relations (IR) have attempted to analyse the policy implications of the ‘ASEAN Way’, its treatment within extant literature tend to commit an epistemic fallacy. This article explores the possibility of a Critical Realist ontology to suggest that ‘ASEAN Way’ is a grammar within which behavioural norms are couched, and enabled the Organisation to undergo transformation in its 40-year history.

The 40-year history of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) represents an institutional transformation from an anti-communist organisation, vis-à-vis Vietnam, since its founding in 1967; to an inclusive regional club espousing its former hypothetical enemy by the time Hanoi normalised diplomatic relations with Washington in 1995. At the same time, the evolution of ASEAN engendered a proliferation of a much-derided ‘alphabet-soup’ of committees and working groups which seems indecisive, if not inept. Not only that, the intra-mural bonhomie provides an impression to the outside world that the group is happy to condone abuse of power in member states ranging from gross human rights violations in Myanmar; jailing of a government critic in Malaysia; or blatant censorship in Singapore, to mention just a few. This sense of ‘feel-good factor’ deriving from a norm of non-intervention give the appearance that ASEAN is a talking-shop lacking in momentum and equally short on good governance.¹

The defining element of ASEAN’s modus operandi is the so-called ‘ASEAN Way’—‘a set of diplomatic norms shared by the member [states]’²—despite the difficulty in defining it. Superficially, it is a nebulous concept incorporating non-interference and preservation of sovereignty, idea both familiar in international law and the discipline of International Relations (IR). As Amitav Acharya notes, it is safe to conclude that ‘ASEAN Way’ embraces ‘soft regionalism’, as well as ‘consensus-

---

building’, in intra-mural decision making. But apart from an attempt at legalistic representation—the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation (TAC) as its main legal document is a case in point—a holistic conceptualisation of its ‘substance’ is enigmatic, particularly so when the Organisation subscribes to informality as its preferred way of addressing issues.

However, a question remains as to the pervasiveness of ‘ASEAN Way’ in the diplomatic practice of its member states. Moreover, the Bali and Tokyo summits of October and December 2003, respectively, saw the permeation of ‘ASEAN Way’ beyond the boundaries of the Organisation into inviting China, India, and Japan to accede to TAC. The resilience of ‘ASEAN Way’ in spite of its ambiguity, as well as its ability to induce non-ASEAN members to subscribe to the notion, need to be taken seriously. This article re-considers ‘ASEAN Way’ as an emergence: despite the seeming lack of substance, it is nevertheless an entity under construction via a series of negotiation and socialisation between and among the ASEAN member states and its regional partners. Instead of treating its ambiguity as a vice, I argue that it is the flexibility which allowed ‘ASEAN Way’ to evolve out of its regional confines to encompass both East and South Asia, cum large. As Koro Bessho argues, ASEAN ‘has been willing to take the initiative outside of its sub-region and has shown how unity can be forged from diversity’.

This article is divided into four sections. The first section reviews the extant literature on ‘ASEAN Way’, pointing out that there is a tendency to commit epistemic fallacy by conflating the representation of concept with its ontology. Put differently, by attempting to locate substance where it is extremely tenuous to do so, existing literature ends up constructing a chimera instead. Section two investigates the process of emergence in its application to ‘ASEAN Way’, by arguing that it is tantamount to a grammar through which ASEAN member states socialise with one another. Section three develops on the idea of ‘ASEAN Way’ as a grammar, by pointing out that in practice, ASEAN members constantly used the notion in their perlocutionary acts, resulting in the reification of ‘ASEAN Way’ as a social reality. The final section

---

4 See for example, Sekai shuho, 16 December 2003, pp. 18-19.
5 For a theoretical exposition of emergence, see Margaret Archer, *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory* (Rev. ed)(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
discusses the dynamic behind the Tokyo Summit of December 2003. Its three-fold significance as a first ASEAN meeting to be held outside Southeast Asia; Tokyo’s decision to sign TAC; and the decision by the Organisation to expand its scope of activity to encompass human- and collective security designates a significant transformation in ASEAN’s parameters. I conclude by suggesting that it was the flexibility borne of ambiguity that allowed this evolution to take place at all.

**Epistemic Fallacy in Existing Literature**

The ambiguity of ‘ASEAN Way’ makes it difficult to grasp its essence. The extant literature on ASEAN attempts to describe the concept by analysing what ideas are being represented, and the policy implications derived from it. However, an effort at pinpointing what *is*, rather than what is *meant* by, it is oftentimes frustrating. Analyses thus far have been long on epistemology but short on ontology. This is the case even when we refer to ASEAN documents for clues to its essential features. Here again, the principles espoused by ‘ASEAN Way’ are clearly represented; but insofar as there is no explicit delineation of its internal components suggests that it remains nebulous. The Zone of Peace, Neutrality, and Freedom (ZOPFAN) Declaration of November 1971 states that,

> Recognizing the right of every state, large or small, to lend its national existence free from outside interference in its internal affairs as this interference will adversely affect its freedom, independence and integrity.

Further more, ZOPFAN states that ASEAN members are, ‘[d]edicated to the maintenance of peace, freedom and independence unimpaired’.

Consensual decision-making and non-interference are central concepts espoused by the ‘ASEAN Way’. The Treaty of Amity and Co-operation (TAC) of February 1976 states that it seeks to uphold:

*Article 2*

(a) Mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity of all nations.
(b) The right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion.
(c) Non-interference in the internal affairs of one another.
Article 13 also calls for resolution of disputes ‘through friendly negotiations’. Simply put, ‘ASEAN Way’ prescribes non-violent conflict resolution through dialogue while calling for its members to refrain from arouses commotion. Amitav Acharya argues that it ‘is usually described as a decision-making process that features a high degree of consultation and consensus’. In highlighting the ambiguity of the concept, Acharya goes on to suggest that

The ASEAN Way is a term favoured by ASEAN leaders themselves to describe the process of intra-mural interaction and to distinguish it from other, especially Western, multilateral settings. But there is no official definition of the term.

Acharya’s depiction of ‘ASEAN Way’ as a set of ideas distinct from western practice is illustrative of the tendency to explain away the term by suggesting what it is not, rather than what it is. Its purported ‘Asian’ distinctiveness is reflected in the similarities between how ASEAN operates, on the one hand, and that of Malay customs musyawarah (consultation) and mufakat (consensus), on the other. In effect, ‘ASEAN Way’ seems to reflect members’ reluctance to engage in debates in favour of a less confrontational approach to governance, as well as depicting age-old memories of colonialism and the resultant xenophobia of today.

As seen above, ‘ASEAN Way’ exemplifies certain behavioural norms for dispute settlement and agenda setting. It also seems to signify a uniquely ‘Asian’ approach to addressing issues, e.g., a calm and orderly approach to disagreements, compared to a rather confrontational one in the West. While students of ASEAN generally share scepticism towards the concept, questioning its coherence and doubting its substance, their analyses are divided over whether to profess pessimism by refusing to grant any meaningful symbolism to it, on the one hand; or on the other hand...

---

hand, to show sympathy to the ‘ASEAN Way’ in treating it as representing an on-going process towards community-building in Southeast Asia, on the other.

‘ASEAN Way’ as Chimera

Pessimists show their scepticism for ‘ASEAN Way’ by focusing on the gap between what it purports to prescribe, on the one hand; and the outcome of its inaction and complacency in the form of an ‘alphabet soup’, on the other. The problem is compounded by the perseverance of ‘ASEAN Way’—despite the seeming lack of substance, the Organisation and its modus operandi have not only survived for nearly 40 years, but that it underwent transformation from a predominantly anti-communist grouping to a comprehensively Southeast Asian institution admitting Vietnam into its ranks in 1995. Yet, a Neofunctionalist analysis fails to carry mileage, because ASEAN members seems to have had no intention of constructing a security community, and instead, any semblance of institutionalisation was a result of accumulating momentum and exogenous factors such as the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. In short, pessimists identify a significant cleavage between theory and practice.

Shaun Narine considers ‘ASEAN Way’ to be a convenient publicity tool for the Organisation to appeal to the outside world—namely the West—that ASEAN has a distinctly ‘Asian’ answers to problems not unfamiliar in the West. Narine argues that ‘ASEAN is not capable of resolving many issues of contention between its members, but it can move these issues aside so that they do not prevent progress in other areas’, adding that ‘the ASEAN Way is a realistically modest approach to dealing with intra-ASEAN relations’. For Narine, ‘ASEAN Way’ is a byword for deferential attitudes that member states have adopted towards intra-mural problems, suggesting that members ‘agree to disagree’ in order to maintain an ‘illusion of

---

11 Shaun Narine, Explaining ASEAN Regionalism in Southeast Asia (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002), p. 31.
12 Narine, Explaining ASEAN Regionalism, p. 33.
ASEAN unity’. In a similar vein, Acharya argues that ‘the “ASEAN Way” involves a commitment to carry on with consultation without any specific formula or modality for achieving a desired outcome’. For him, ‘ASEAN regionalism [is] a process of interaction and socialization’, but it ‘remains primarily a vehicle through which its members pursue their national interests’. He warns that “ASEAN Way” has ‘paradoxical effects on ASEAN’s future as a security community’, and as such, the Organisation needs to ‘reinvent itself’, if it is seeking to become an ascendant, not a redundant, regional institution.

Pessimists show no compunction towards treating ‘ASEAN Way’ as a mere procedure for a comfortable and non-controversial conversation whereby ASEAN members congregate to discuss various issues while exhibiting shared reluctance in tackling problems outright. Until now, the modus operandi has been able to accommodate the expansion from the original five members to the current ASEAN-10, but Ralf Emmer is sceptical about the prospects for the future. He predicts that, while the present, cosy, arrangement has been successful thus far, the members will increasingly encounter difficulties in due course, as ‘ASEAN Way’ is ill prepared to tackle—let alone address—issues such as terrorism directly. Alan Collins parallels this view, when he cautions that, ‘[a]lthough ending the non-interference principle does not equate to ending the “ASEAN Way”, it will be a harbinger of change which will produce uncertainty, and uncertainty begets the security dilemma’. Bilson Kurus identifies the reluctance of member states to ‘forgo national interest considerations (real of perceived) in favour of broader regional interest’ as its defining element. While ASEAN members ‘search for consensus’ and there exists a ‘spirit of togetherness’, Kurus argues that ‘[i]n practice, the lowest common denominator

15 Acharya, Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia, p. 6.
16 Acharya, Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia, p. 7.
17 Acharya, Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia, p. 208.
imperative means that ASEAN can only move as fast as its slowest member”. Hence, the pessimists see the limits of ‘ASEAN Way’ as deriving from external factors beyond the control of member governments, exacerbated through shared reluctance within the Organisation. For them, this combination renders unity meaningless, and confines the institution into perennial inaction.

**A Case for Optimism**

Contrary to pessimists, optimists seek to characterise ‘ASEAN Way’ by attempting to isolate its essential features, and seek to identify norms of behaviour that are represented through this particular mode of interaction within ASEAN. Michael Leiffer argues that ‘ASEAN has displayed a quality of political cohesion and a diplomatic accomplishment unanticipated at the outset’. He suggests that ‘ASEAN began its corporate life as a diplomatic device for subregional reconciliation’, and despite the recurrent tensions between and among the member states, differences are usually accommodated due to a ‘common recognition of the utility of membership’. For Leiffer, as it is for many of the pessimists, ‘ASEAN Way’ is tantamount to a handy diplomatic device for members to maintain some semblance of a coherent community. Yet, instead of dismissing it as a chimera, he identifies its key essence as ASEAN’s willingness to maintain an ‘international reputation as a diplomatic community’ through an ‘evolving practice of bureaucratic and ministerial consultation’. Hence, despite the difficulty of pinpointing what exactly it is, Leiffer exudes a sense of sympathy, if not optimism, towards the ‘ASEAN Way’ as an integral idea.

Hiro Katsumata identifies four elements that distinguish the concept: (1) the principle of non-interference; (2) quiet diplomacy; (3) non-use of force; and (4) consensual decision-making. Comparing ASEAN with other, ‘western’, institutions steeped in debate, Katsumata points out that ‘[i]n Asia, what is important is a common

---

23 Leiffer, *ASEAN and the Security of South-East Asia*, p. VII.
24 Leiffer, *ASEAN and the Security of South-East Asia*, p. 156.
26 Leiffer, *ASEAN and the Security of South-East Asia*, p. VIII.
understanding of an agenda achieved through lengthy dialogue and consultation’, 28 and ‘ASEAN Way’ represents a ‘diplomatic norm’ derived from traditional musyawarah and mufakat. 29 As such, despite its similarities to international legal norms, it needs to be understood within an Asian context to the extent that ‘the global norms have taken root in Southeast Asia in a particular context, as a set of diplomatic norms shared by the ASEAN members’. 30 Here, instead of stressing the particularities of the concept, Katsumata locates it within the framework of international norms. Thus, even when he suggests that ‘ASEAN’s unity can only be maintained by strict adherence to the “ASEAN Way”’, 31 he argues that ‘the ideological basis of the “ASEAN Way” is constituted by the norms at the global level, which had been valid prior to the establishment of the Association’. 32 As such, Katsumata’s optimism encounters a potential problem: while the concept necessitates a unique, Asian, context, it also constitutes a global norm, suggesting, instead, that there is no need for a recourse to ‘Asian’ conception of ‘ASEAN Way’ in the first place.

Similar to Katsumata’s assertion that ‘ASEAN Way’ is a regional rendition of international norms espousing non-intervention, Robin Ramcharan suggests that it is a reiteration of ‘traditional notions in international relations of equality of the sovereign states (from diminutive Singapore to mammoth Indonesia) and the consequent right to exclusive sovereignty’. 33 In a similar vein to Leiffer, Ramcharan considers ASEAN to resemble ‘a security community’, 34 and ‘ASEAN governments have adhered to the principle of non-interference without always strictly abiding by the principle’. 35 In short, Ramcharan singles out non-intervention as ASEAN’s principal mode of operation.

Tobias Nischalke attempts to make sense of ‘ASEAN Way’ through reference to security communities. He suggests that ASEAN possesses three elements which captures ‘the essence of collective identities: shared meaning structures and values, mutual identifications among community members, and compliance with the norms

34 Ramcharan, “ASEAN and Non-interference”, p. 65.
35 Ramcharan, “ASEAN and Non-interference”, p. 81.
and practices accepted by the group’.\textsuperscript{36} He posits that “ASEAN Way” entails behavioural norms encapsulated in a code of conduct and a set of procedural norms’,\textsuperscript{37} a process ‘characterised by informality, and it serves to forge a general consensus that accommodates the different viewpoints of all parties before a formal decision is made’.\textsuperscript{38} He adds:

Put starkly, the ‘ASEAN Way’ has proven to be a myth. As an international actor, ASEAN has constituted a community of convenience based on functional considerations rather than a community of shared visions…. ASEAN’s behaviour bespeaks of a latent reservoir of ‘we-feeling’ that could provide the seed for a community in the future.\textsuperscript{39}

Nischalke’s ambivalence, nevertheless, leads him to conclude with an optimistic assessment.

\textit{‘ASEAN Way’ and the Epistemic Fallacy}

Both the detractors and sympathisers experience difficulty ascribing ontological characteristics to ‘ASEAN Way’. Instead, they analyse norms of non-intervention and consensual decision-making as representative of this \textit{modus operandi}. Hence, when the concept is analysed for what it purports to prescribe, and once it is contrasted to the momentum within ASEAN (or lack thereof), extant literature only suggest that it is either an ambiguous notion of ‘together-ness’\textsuperscript{40} or a regional variation on a global norm,\textsuperscript{41} or worse, a myth.\textsuperscript{42} While professing to emphasise traditional \textit{musyawarah} and \textit{mufakat} as both a regional and cultural framework within which ‘ASEAN Way’ needs to be understood, insofar as similarities to existing international norms are easily recognised, the regional explanation becomes almost redundant. In other words, these analyses construct an essentialist notion of ‘ASEAN Way’ as an Asian concept

\textsuperscript{38} Nischalke, “Insights from ASEAN’s Foreign Policy Co-operation”, pp. 90-91.
\textsuperscript{39} Nischalke, “Insights from ASEAN’S Foreign Policy Co-operation”, p. 107.
\textsuperscript{40} Katsumata, “Reconstruction of Diplomatic Norms in Southeast Asia”, p. 111.
\textsuperscript{41} Kurus, “The ASEAN Triad”, p. 405.
\textsuperscript{42} Nischalke, “Insights from ASEAN’S Foreign Policy Co-operation”, p. 107.
without reference to what is truly ‘Asian’ about it. Apart from being practised by ASEAN members, extant literature cannot identify characteristics that are uniquely ‘Asian’ about ‘ASEAN Way’, leaving no choice but to refer to international legal norms to augment the deficit. This is problematic, given that they also identify cultural distinctiveness as an underlying assumption. Without reference to the agency of ASEAN members, the meaning of ‘ASEAN Way’ is subsumed within the larger framework of international legal norms to the effect that ‘ASEAN’ in ‘ASEAN Way’ begins to lose its significance.

At the same time, what is conspicuous in the current explanation of ‘ASEAN Way’ is an attempt at defining the concept through its proximity to international norms familiar in IR rather than the intersubjective processes of emergence and elaboration. Instead of explaining ASEAN’s mode of operation as a set of shared meanings and reference points for member states to gauge their actions, both the pessimists and optimists alike treat ‘ASEAN Way’ as exogenous to ASEAN members and their interaction within the institutional framework by comparing it to a regional representation of an already-existing set of norms. Consequently, this exogeneity renders ASEAN as a mere receptacle for mundane—and generic—set of behavioural pattern seen around the world, rather than a proprietor of institutional facts. Hence, despite Katsumata’s assertion that ‘norms are not exogenous to the process, and should not be treated as given and fixed’, and Nischalke’s identification of shared meaning structures and common identity as the ‘driving forces behind ASEAN diplomacy’, juxtaposition of ‘ASEAN Way’ with international norms cannot prevent its pull away from endogeneity.

Ultimately, the problem with the extant literature on ‘ASEAN Way’ lies in its epistemic fallacy: explanation of the concept through the use of international norms conflating its mode of representation with its ontology. What is amiss with the above analyses is the process of emergence and elaboration—the sociological process through which ‘ASEAN Way’ as a symbolic structure was constructed as a result of

---

43 Acharya also argues that ‘ASEAN Way’ is a ‘process’, albeit a decision-making one, entailing informality and consensus-building. This is a helpful start in appreciating the nebulous characteristics of the ‘ASEAN Way’, but does not address its malleable nature, as I seek to show later. See Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia*, pp. 64-70.


social interaction between and among the ASEAN member states in its 40-year history. To be sure, the concept remains nebulous; but it is misleading to demand that ‘ASEAN Way’ needs to possess substance. Rather, I believe it is useful to accept its ambiguity and, instead, seek out ways to provide a Critical Realist explanation of how institutional facts emerge out of iterated interactions. Put differently, I treat ‘ASEAN Way’ as a manifestation of particular ways in which ASEAN members relate to one another, retaining its vagueness because it has been elaborated as such since the Association’s inception in 1967. Therefore, it is crucial to move away from a Neofunctionalist penchant for delineating identifying characteristics, and instead, start appreciating the dynamism behind ‘ASEAN Way’ as an ongoing project under construction..

‘ASEAN Way’ as Emergence

Looking at variations in the depiction of ‘ASEAN-Way’ reveals that its true nature is more akin to a representational phenomenon embedded primarily within discourses rather than a simple re-iteration of ‘western’ values shrouded in ‘Asian’ garments. This is not surprising due to the nebulousness of the concept. On the one hand, practitioners are adept at invoking it while not being compelled to substantiate it; and, on the other hand, analysts seem to experience difficulties making sense of it given that gazing deeper into its core attributes only blurs the picture. While analysing the representational practice of ‘ASEAN Way’ is important, it is equally salient to indulge in an investigation of it as an ‘emergence’ that started acquiring discrete symbolism during the process of socialisation between and among the ASEAN members, as well as their negotiation partners in East Asia and beyond. In other words, ‘ASEAN Way’ becomes a ‘password’ for member states and their neighbours to potentially tap into a toolbox for future collective identity formation. By treating it as such, we can start re-conceptualising it as an intersubjective entity that has emerged through iterated practices and speech acts. Put differently, ‘ASEAN Way’ can be recapitulated as an integral symbol of ASEAN modus operandi that has been elaborated into an institutional fact; and by trying to make sense of this sociological
process, we can discern its essence without reference to other, extant, principles such as international law.

The concept of ‘emergence’ from Social Theory is useful in this exercise. Emergence refers to the process in which ideas and meanings are reified into a social entity distinct from the practices that made it possible in the first place. In short, it is a sociological process through which symbols become manifest.\(^{47}\) Instead of treating ‘ASEAN Way’ as a representation espousing the extant notion of sovereignty in international law, it might be more fruitful to re-cast it as an emergent property borne of iterated interaction within the wider ASEAN arena, both intra- and extra-mural. This way, the otherwise nebulous concept can be re-considered as a grammar within which ASEAN actions are identified, and their essence realised. Margaret Archer suggests that ‘social reality is unlike any other because of its human constitution’, and as such, it has three characteristics: (1) it is inseparable from agential components; (2) it has transformability; and (3) agents are \textit{not} immutable.\(^{48}\) Treating ‘ASEAN Way’ as one form of a social reality allows us to move beyond the task of identifying identical principles elsewhere, and instead, enables us to analyse it despite the foggy nature of its existence.

Social Theory allows us to look at ‘ASEAN Way’ as a reified entity, not because I reify it for parsimony, but because agents reconstruct institutional facts through their iterated interactions.\(^{49}\) And it is for this reason that reification needs to be take seriously rather than be criticised. As Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper remind us, ‘[r]eification is a social process, not only an intellectual practice’.\(^{50}\) Thus, ‘ASEAN Way’ can be studied as an emergence, since much of its characteristics are discerned from routine and constant reference to it by ASEAN policy makers. The recognition that ‘ASEAN Way’ has essence of sorts derives from the manifestation of mutual understanding and practices into a sense of mutual belonging to which the member states can easily refer and with which to interact. This relationship between


\(^{49}\) Archer, \textit{Realist Social Theory}, p. 5.

the practitioner and practice is the very nexus upon which emergence and elaboration takes place.

Emergence as a Social Process

The emergent property of ‘ASEAN Way’ reaffirms its efficacy through the process of socialisation in which member states reify ideas and meanings through their diplomatic intercourse within and beyond the realm of ASEAN. Robert Keohane argues that international institutions constitute a ‘market place’ for the exchange of national interests.\(^{51}\) Taking this idea further, international regimes such as ASEAN provide a forum within which members exchange narratives, thereby providing a forum for the (re)construction of various symbolic meanings. Even if the actual exchange was unintended, the unintended consequences of intersubjective structures emerging from the process is significant enough in precipitating changes in the way agents act towards themselves.\(^{52}\) The emergence of shared understandings is not an automatic process: it entails negotiations between and among the actors involved, just as in the emergence of collective identity within the logic of collective action.\(^{53}\) Particular meanings are borne of particular interactions, since the actors involved in the negotiation process carries with them an ontological baggage from their earlier interaction with the environment.\(^{54}\) Through iterated practice, a context is born and manifested, allowing agents to realise that their actions are context-bound.\(^{55}\) Contra Anthony Giddens’s assertion that culture and actors constitute a ‘duality’ where agents and structure are mutually constitutive,\(^{56}\) Archer’s rejoinder that they, instead, comprise a ‘dualism’, thereby allowing for interaction between the structure and agent


\(^{52}\) See Archer, *Culture and Agency*.


\(^{55}\) Archer, *A Realist Social Theory*, p. 106.

is more helpful in this analysis. Otherwise, we remain unable to account for instances of ASEAN members making reference to the ‘ASEAN Way’.

There is no need for interlocutors to clearly comprehend the social context which gives rise to the ‘ASEAN Way’. The inherent ambiguity of intersubjectivity is sufficient for agents to interact within the framework and constantly reconstruct the particular structure and yet share a sense of belonging. This is in stark contrast to game-theoretic approaches where particular games are pre-defined, as if the actors know exactly what games they were intent on playing. Alexander Wendt realises this, and suggests that he can sympathise with game-theoretic analysis, except for its lack of insight into how identities play their part. In a similar vein, ASEAN members may not have been intent on constructing ‘ASEAN Way’ as such; but it nonetheless emerged after iterated interactions between and among themselves. What matters in the end is how actors constantly reconstruct the social context and the associated norms for behaviour.

Once particular social context emerges, agents seek comfort in replicating behavioural norms through their everyday activities. Just like the social context, actors are not required to consciously follow the rules of behaviour. Most likely, the norms are reconstructed through habitual reiteration by agents seeking to further their interests. As John Searle argues in the process of institutional reconstruction,

We create a new institutional fact...by using an object (or objects) with an existing status function, such as sentence, whose existence is itself an institutional fact, to perform a certain type of speech act, the fact of whose performance is yet another institutional fact.

As such, it should not be problematic greatly that ‘ASEAN Way’ seems devoid of substance and that an only recourse to making sense of it is to identify similarities to international legal norms or cultural affinities to *musyawarah* and *mufakat*. My

---

57 Archer, *Culture and Agency*.  
60 See Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia*, p. 63.  
concern is with the essence of ‘ASEAN Way’ as defined through its emergence and reiteration: being an intersubjectivity constructed out of iterated interaction between and among the ASEAN members, and that, it has been elaborated into a ‘habit’ of doing things together, almost a ‘grammar’ within which ASEAN actions are to be defined. This habit is co-constitutive of the agents involved in its very reconstruction; but as Archer suggests, ‘culture is man-made but escapes its makers to act back on them.’

Hence, ‘ASEAN Way’ can be considered a grammar with which member states interact with one another, and its emergent property allows them to interact with the grammar itself, just as we can talk about the grammatical construction of sentences we utter. Indeed, it is the possibility of ASEAN members being able to reify ‘ASEAN Way’ that enabled the concept to prosper despite its haziness. Its manifestation through discursivity has allowed it to acquire essence even if its substance might still be ambiguous.

**Institutional Facts as Grammar**

The discursive nature of institutional facts does not mean, however, that meanings are only discernable through performance alone. Contra Postmodernists, language is a ‘deed’ that is borne of speaker speaking the language, rather than vice versa. This means that actor identities are important, and agents’ worldviews must also be taken into account. Thus, ‘ASEAN Way’ is not only a grammar which defines what is implied by ASEAN membership and intramural understandings, but rather, it is the members themselves constantly reconstructing what is implied through ‘ASEAN Way’. The behavioural norm within the ASEAN framework is defined through this grammar, and any actor who ‘speaks the language’ of ASEAN norms can be included within its larger framework, such as the TAC. In other words, ‘ASEAN Way’ is an on-going project borne of ASEAN members’ collective identity formation garnered through decades of diplomatic negotiations.

---

64 Archer, *Culture and Agency*, p. 107.
The grammar of ‘ASEAN Way’ regulates the way its partners interact with one another. Searle argues that, ‘speaking a language is engaging in a (highly complex) rule-governed form of behavior’,\(^66\) and the linguistic capabilities of agents represent the internalisation of such a rule.\(^67\) Being able to ‘speak’ and ‘comprehend’ the grammar is an integral part of identifying ASEAN partners. As Noam Chomsky puts it,

I am assuming grammatical competence to be a system of rules that generate and relate certain mental representations, including in particular representations of form and meaning, the exact character of which is to be discovered, though a fair amount is known about them. These rules, furthermore, operate in accordance with certain general principles.\(^68\)

The common grammar of accepted and desired behaviour enables interlocutors to negotiate a common identity. As Benedict Anderson argues, the power of language lies in its impetus for the emergence and elaboration of an imagined community,\(^69\) and the grammar helps agents to share symbols for common identification.\(^70\) Similar to the process outlined by Anderson, the emergence of ‘ASEAN Way’ as a grammar follows the trajectory whereby diplomatic negotiations give rise to common identity and understanding, which in turn, set in motion the channel for the realisation of behavioural norms, and subsequently, the conception of collective belonging.\(^71\) As Archer argues,

Realism can never endorse the ‘epistemic fallacy’, when what is reality is taken to be, courtesy of our instrumental rationality or social discourse, is substituted for what the world really is. Realism can never endorse the ‘epistemic fallacy’ and, in this connection, it must necessarily insist that how the world is has a regulatory effect upon what we make of it and, in turn, what it makes us’.\(^72\)

Once the common identity is forged, shared prescriptions for appropriate actions are delineated within the ‘ASEAN Way’.

---

\(^70\) Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 32-33.
\(^71\) See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 67.
‘ASEAN Way’ as a grammar prescribes the ‘logic of appropriateness’, even despite the lack of a coherent set of explicit principles that is unique to East Asia. Whatever the case may be, once it has been reified into a grammar, its meanings constantly undergo reconstruction, as member states engage in iterated diplomatic negotiations between and among themselves, within—and post-2003 especially—beyond the organisational framework of ASEAN.

‘ASEAN Way’ as Perlocutionary Act

As seen above, institutional facts emerge and are elaborated into a ‘grammar’ delineating behavioural norms once agents—consciously as well as unconsciously—reiterate it through social interaction amongst themselves. Agents reconstruct the grammar in their everyday activities; but the grammar, in turn, reconstructs agents by socialising them into speaking the ‘language’ of accepted behaviour. In other words, both the grammar and agents are mutually constituted. This means that the grammar of ‘ASEAN Way’ cannot be studied without reference to the pronouncements of ASEAN member states, while members reiterate their adherence to the principles of the Organisation through constant re-invocation. In other words, in order to fully appreciate the potency of ‘ASEAN Way’, despite its purported ambiguity, analysis involves a study of the dynamics of perlocution.

Former Malaysian foreign minister, Tan Sri Ghazli Shafie refers to the practices within ASEAN as a ‘habit of mind among its citizens…an entente of a special kind which transcends boundaries, governments and people’, almost akin to a ‘telepathic community’. Marjorie Suriyamongkol quotes a UN team studying ASEAN in 1972 which already states then that the ASEAN way of doing things

74 Alexander Wendt, ‘Agent-Structure Problem’.
resembles a ‘consensus of words than a consensus of action’, asking, ‘when does action replace rhetoric?’ There is no direct answer to this UN question; but the point about the potency of ‘ASEAN Way’ lies in its discursivity, rather than the formalisation of the institution. Being a ‘state of mind’, the significance of its speech act manifestation should not be trivialised. Indeed, as Shawn Narine argues, ASEAN assumes that talking can produce mutually beneficial interests.

This ontological ambiguity invites criticisms. In pointing out the uncertainties of discursive constructs, Hiro Katsumata argues that ‘ASEAN’s unity can only be maintained by strict adherence to the “ASEAN Way”’. While this represents the modus operandi of ‘ASEAN Way’, Tobias Ingo Nischalke finds it particularly problematic. He argues that, in practice, ‘ASEAN Way’ has not been delivered comprehensively, and as such, ‘[p]ut starkly, the “ASEAN Way” has proven to be a myth’. Yet, he, too, recognises that a shared meaning structure construes a hallmark of collective identity formation, to the effect that the discursivity of ‘ASEAN Way’ provides symbolic significance towards the construction of collective identity in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, Nischalke insists that ‘shared meaning structures among ASEAN members have been based on a narrow foundation of regional norms of conduct and agreement on the benefits of balancing precepts in security affairs.’

The problem with narrow—and often pessimistic—understanding of ‘ASEAN Way’ lies in its conflation of an institution’s discursive construction with its actual institutional dynamics. The penchant for organisational clarity clouds the distinction between ontology and epistemology, to suggest that unless the material attributes of ‘ASEAN Way’ can clearly be identified, its essence is left trivialised; and official narratives within ASEAN framework making reference to the ‘ASEAN Way’ of intra-

---

78 Suriyamongol, Politics of ASEAN Economic Co-operation, pp. 78-79.
mural dialogue and extra-mural negotiations are treated as mere lip-service, ultimately
doing disservice to the sociological processes of emergence and elaboration. In other
words, the reification (as social reality) of ‘ASEAN Way’ and the mutual constitution
of agents and grammar of action are ignored, simply due to the difficulty of grasping
the material institutional dynamic. The purported shortcomings of ‘ASEAN Way’ is
seen as an error of commission by member states, when it might simply be an error of
omission privileging perlocution rather than organisational infrastructure.

Contrary to the view focusing primarily on the material attributes of ASEAN’s
operational norms, Diane Mauzy argues that a shared meaning structure ‘give the
ASEAN states a bond’. 85 Amitav Acharya notes that ‘[m]ultilateral institution-
building in the Asia-Pacific region is thus a sociological and intersubjective dynamic,
rather than a legalistic and formalistic one.’ 86 He quotes Lee Kwan Yew suggesting
that

So long as members who are not yet ready to participate are not damaged by
non-participation, the power of veto need to be exercised … when four agree
and one does not object, this can still be considered a consensus, and the four
should proceed with a new regional scheme. 87

While recognising that ‘what passes for the “ASEAN Way” … is simply a pragmatic
and practical response to situations in which multilateralism is being constrained by
individual state interests’, 88 Acharya adds that,

‘The ASEAN Way’, despite its practical limitations has been a useful symbol
for regional policy makers to advance this process of socialization. It as helped
to define the character of regional institutions, helping us to understand not
only why multilateralism is emerging in the Asia-Pacific region now, but more
importantly, which type of multilateralism is emerging and will prove viable
in the end. 89

Thus, the seeming ambiguity of ‘ASEAN-Way’ may in fact hold the key to its
persistence, deriving from the easy-to-use grammar for member states to make

85 Diane K. Mauzy, ‘The Uman Rights and “Asian Values” Debate in Southeast Asia: Trying
86 Amitav Acharya, ‘Ideas, Identity, and Institution-Building: From the “ASEAN Way” to the
recurrent references to it without specifying formal, legalistic, and material, framework; while at the same time, enabling the actors to share in the ‘we-feeling’, distinguishing the Organisation from other, western, institutions, thereby re-affirming its unique ‘Asianess’.

The following section investigates how the intersubjective nature of ‘ASEAN Way’ not only affects the actions of member states, but also how it interpenetrates actors beyond the institutional framework of the Organisation. I take the December 2003 ASEAN meeting in Tokyo when Japan agreed to sign on to TAC. This process is significant, given the migration of the institutional fact from ASEAN-proper to ASEAN+3, and moreover, it sheds light on the potency of ‘ASEAN Way’ as an emergence and elaboration—something that cannot be explained solely through the formal, legalistic, and materialistic assumptions.

**ASEAN Tokyo Meeting and the Intersubjective Amplification**

The post-9/11 world order meant an addition to the vocabulary of ‘threat’ perception deriving mainly from a set of loosely-associated, yet highly potent and deadly, non-state actors. As a region with a high concentration of Muslims, Southeast Asia—and hence ASEAN—is no exception in having have to adopt the new syntax of diplomacy. Challenged by this changed international—and regional—environment, the Organisation had to fundamentally re-conceptualise what is to be meant by ‘security’: moving away from the traditional definition to a more inclusive one entailing efforts to re-cast human dimensions as a bulwark against germinating seeds of terrorism. Within the context of ‘ASEAN Way’, it also meant a necessity to tweak the grammatical structure such that a more comprehensive vision of human security at a regional level can be achieved. It is within this context that the intersubjective amplification of ‘ASEAN Way’—both grammatically and geographically—took place.

*The Bali Summit and the Building Momentum*
The Japan-ASEAN summit which took place on 11-12 December 2003 followed the footsteps of an earlier Bali summit in October 2003. Given that the memories of terrorist attack in 2002 was still fresh within the minds of ASEAN leaders, the choice of this island resort as a venue for the ninth summit signified the Organisation’s determination to address security threat on top of the usual gamut of economic agenda. As Anthony Smith notes, ‘the ASEAN Concord II (or Bali Concord II) establishes an ASC [ASEAN Security Community] in order to bring “ASEAN’s political and security cooperation to a higher plane”’.  

Article 2 of the ASC stipulates that ‘ASC members commit to relying “exclusively” on peaceful processes in the settlement of “intra-regional differences”’. At first glance, the Bali Concord II seems innocuous for an international organisation striving for regional harmony. Indeed, following the terrorist bombings, enhanced security commitment by member states seems like a natural reaction. Yet, within the framework of ‘ASEAN Way’, the agreement is potentially significant. James Ferguson argues that ‘ASEAN Concord II is indeed a daring, if loosely phrased, blueprint for the future of Southeast Asia’. For an organisation whose *modus operandi* was defined through consensus, ASC opens a way for a more pro-active debate between and among the member states, as well as for the grammar of ‘ASEAN Way’ to spread beyond ASEAN borders in search of a wider security assurance.

Section 3 of the Concord states that ‘ASEAN shall urgently and effectively address the challenge of translating ASEAN cultural diversities and different economic levels into equitable developmental opportunity in an environment of solidarity, regional resilience and harmony’. And in the following section, it stipulates that

---

91 Smith, ‘ASEAN’s Ninth Summit’, p. 423.
93 Quoted in Ferguson, ‘ASEAN Concord II’, p. 398.
the enhancement of defence cooperation among ASEAN countries, develop a set of socio-political values and principles and resolve to settle long-standing disputes through peaceful means.\textsuperscript{94}

To the extent that the Concord recognises TAC as an ‘effective code of conduct for relations among governments’, its significance lies in the adoption of traditional notions of security—a putative step forward for ASEAN to become more integrated as a viable international organisation, while preserving the basic framework of ‘ASEAN Way’. At the same time, however, Bali Concord II has taken the notion of security as step further by adopting the language of ‘human security’ as a viable alternative to addressing perceived threats in the post-9/11 and post-Bali 2002 international environment. As Ferguson suggests, ‘the human security includes a wide range of economic development, and cultural criteria that are largely compatible with the traditional developmentalist aims of early ASEAN’\textsuperscript{95} in a ‘recognition that underdevelopment in a neighbouring country often lead to transboundary problems and mounting transnational threats.’\textsuperscript{96} The realisation of the need to address ‘human security’ emerged in parallel with the amplification of ‘ASEAN Way’ as an intersubjective structure, re-defining what it meant by ‘security’ through the definition of ‘threat’ as encompassing risks to human wellbeing and any impediment to the construction of ‘togetherness’. In short, differently, the security concern necessitated by exogenous factors in the post-9/11 international order precipitated an evolution in the grammar of ASEAN \textit{modus operandi}.

Hence, by the time the Tokyo summit was held in December 2003, ASEAN has adopted an altered grammar of ‘ASEAN Way’ in which security and mutual wellbeing of the Organisation depended not only on the notions of \textit{intra}-mural non-intervention and consensus; but also on the extended pursuit of security—both traditional and human—as well as seeking partnership from \textit{outside} in order to achieve new goals.\textsuperscript{97} As such, the outcome of the Tokyo summit—and the fact that the summit was held outside ASEAN—symbolised the potency of ASEAN-Way as an intersubjective structure affecting the behaviour of actors.

\textsuperscript{94} Quoted in Ferguson, ‘ASEAN Concord II’, p. 398.
\textsuperscript{95} Ferguson, ‘ASEAN Concord II’, p. 406.
\textsuperscript{96} Ferguson, ‘ASEAN Concord II’, p. 406.
\textsuperscript{97} For the implication of Bali bombings on the economic regionalism within Southeast Asia, see Takashi Terada, ‘Constructing an “East Asian” Concept and Growing Regional Identity: From EARC to ASEAN+3’, \textit{The Pacific Review}, 16:2 (2003), p. 273.
The significance of the Tokyo meeting on 11-12 December 2003, apart from the fact that ‘this meeting is a historic meeting held outside ASEAN’\textsuperscript{98}, as Japanese prime minister, Koizumi Junichiro, has called it, was evident in the promise made by the Japanese government to sign the TAC. During the October summit in Bali, both China and India took initiatives in joining the Treaty while Japan was notably dithering on the issue. Now that two major powers in Asia had signed on, Tokyo was left with no choice but to follow suit. Put differently, since China and India had agreed to speak the grammar of ‘ASEAN Way’, Tokyo felt compelled to do likewise, in order to maintain its role in East Asia, especially following its rather muted response during the 1997-98 Financial Crisis. To be sure, Japan had been nurturing interest in ASEAN for some time. Yet, in the mid-1990s, Tokyo was less pro-active in subscribing to ‘ASEAN Way’, with the then-Foreign Minister Ikeda Yukihiro in 1996 suggesting that ‘if there is a concrete proposal from ASEAN [for Japan to join ASEAN+3], we would like to respond positively’.\textsuperscript{99} By 2003, though, ASEAN’s interest in co-opting other external actors into adopting the ‘ASEAN Way’ in order to counteract perceived intensification of Chinese influence coincided with Tokyo’s desire to maintain its status in the Organisation. An Indonesian Foreign Ministry official is quoted as saying that ‘China is a formidable rival as well as a valuable partner’,\textsuperscript{100} being mindful of the limits in pursuing ASEAN defence co-operation with a communist state.\textsuperscript{101}

Having sensed the rising influence of China in the region, it became an imperative for Japan to maintain its self-professed role as a leading economic power in East Asia,\textsuperscript{102} and the decision to adopt the language of ‘ASEAN Way’ was seen as a viable way to achieve this goal. Already by 2002, succession of Japanese governments had grown weary of Chinese and South Korean overtures to ASEAN in

\textsuperscript{99} Quoted in Terada, ‘Constructing an “East Asian” Concept’, p. 263.
\textsuperscript{100} \textit{Nihon keizai shimbun}, 12 December 2003, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Nihon keizai shimbun}, 13 December 2003, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{102} Author.
supporting dialogue within the ASEAN+3 framework, the flip-side of which is to suggest Tokyo’s increasing frustration with its own lack of fluency in the language of ‘ASEAN Way’. Along with the aim of buttressing economic interdependence with ASEAN states, TAC enabled Japan to re-affirm its willingness in securing peaceful coexistence in the Asia-Pacific region. Asahi shimbun argued that TAC symbolised the construction of a nascent Japan-ASEAN security partnership, with Koizumi suggesting that ‘there is no doubting the primacy of ASEAN in Japanese foreign policy’. He added that the reason why ‘Japan decided to sign the TAC [was because Tokyo] thought it had a symbolic effect in showing Japan’s enthusiasm as a partner [to ASEAN]’. Hence, Tokyo’s decision to invite ASEAN to hold a summit beyond the familiar regional confines was tantamount to its admission that it was ready to be bound not only by the legal constraints of the TAC, but also with the more over-arching grammar of ‘ASEAN Way’ as a necessary symbolic structure in its relations with Southeast Asia. At the same time, ASEAN’s agreement to hold such a meeting in Tokyo represented the flexibility of the ‘grammar’ in its ability to re-define the Organisation’s regional context without re-interpreting the normative one.

The outcome of the summit—the Tokyo Declaration—was, on the one hand, a familiar reiteration of the ‘ASEAN Way’ re-affirming sovereignty and territorial integrity; but, on the other hand, it was also a step forward in outlining ASEAN’s newly-found enthusiasm in willing to countenance measures towards a possible realisation of a security community in the future. Section 1 of the Declaration, stipulates ‘respect for territorial integrity’ along with ‘peaceful settlement of disputes’ in a clear reiteration of the TAC. However, it also states that ASEAN and Japan had agreed in co-operating towards the construction of an East Asian Community based on fairness and peaceful coexistence. In Section 2, the participants agreed to ‘strengthen’ the partnership; to ‘co-operate with ASEAN Regional Forum and ASEAN+3’ on ‘maritime security and counter-terrorism’; as well as ‘non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction’. It also mentions the creation of East Asian community constructed on respect towards one another reflecting ‘Asian

---

104 Asahi shimbun, 12 December 2003, p. 3.
105 Koizumi quoted in Asahi shimbun, 12 December 2003.
tradition and values’ in pursuit of ‘human security’. Thus, the Declaration is noteworthy for two reasons: (1) it effectively extended the grammar of ‘ASEAN Way’ into Japan, thereby creating a ‘link’ between TAC and US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty; and (2) it reiterates the necessity of pursuing traditional notions of security in addressing the new challenges facing the region—e.g., Chinese military power and terrorist threat—within the newer concept of ‘human security’, economic co-operation, and consensus-seeking, the latter two being extant notions in ASEAN from the time of its inception. In effect, the Declaration became tantamount to a critical reappraisal of what is to be meant by ‘security’ within the permissible bounds of the grammar of ‘ASEAN Way’.

The Logic of Collective Action and Intersubjective Amplification

Having said the above, Tokyo was reluctant to sign the TAC at first. This is not to say that Japan was unwilling to take initiatives in East Asia. On the contrary, its self-confidence inspired Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) to seek a different path towards the realisation of similar goals. In the beginning of 2003, MOFA was frantically lobbying ASEAN members to agree to a Japan-ASEAN Charter, instead of a Declaration, with more legal force, placing it as a linchpin of co-operation between Tokyo and the Organisation for the next 20-30 years. Japanese government’s logic was that, given the Cold War genesis of the TAC, the extant arrangement was by now obsolete, and the post-9/11 international environment necessitated a new legal framework to supersede it. At a January 2003 meeting of Japanese and ASEAN foreign ministers held in Phnom Phen, Japanese foreign minister, Kawaguchi Yoriko, attempted to convince ASEAN members of the importance of a Charter, while keeping silent on whether or not Japan was ready to sign the TAC. But ASEAN members were not swayed by Japanese proposal. The proposed Charter’s exclusion of China—as it was intended to be a purely bilateral treaty—made some members

110 Sekai shuho, 16 December 2003, p. 7.
question its effectiveness;\textsuperscript{111} while MOFA’s insistence on a formal, legalised, nature of the Charter smacked of ‘Western values’ from an ASEAN perspective.\textsuperscript{112} Furthermore, China and India’s signing of the TAC during the October 2003 Bali Summit eventually forced Tokyo to forfeit its push towards a more legalised document. According to Anthony Smith, ‘[s]ome Southeast Asian officials were, reportedly, unsure as to why Japan had failed to undertake adequate bureaucratic preparation to actually join the treaty [TAC] itself [during the Bali Summit]’.\textsuperscript{113}

This diplomatic \textit{quid-pro-quo} in the run up to the December summit shows that Tokyo’s penchant for a Charter, instead of something informal, was representative of its willingness to maintain self-professed status as an influential player in East Asia. But ASEAN’s effective ‘veto’ over Japanese proposals, compounded by Chinese and Indian actions during October 2003, revealed the limits of Japanese approach. Tokyo realised it had no choice but to learn and adopt the grammar of ‘ASEAN Way’ and the TAC. This episode also exposes the potency of an informal understanding between and among the actors in the international arena. Now that much of East Asia is speaking the language of ‘ASEAN Way’, Tokyo had no choice but to acquiesce to the new \textit{lingua franca}. At the same time, what is striking is the ability of this hard-to-define intersubjectivity to be able to tolerate changes in the conceptual framework to encompass traditional notions of security, while keeping the extant informality intact. Such is the viability of an informal institutional framework of the ‘ASEAN Way’.

The Indonesian Foreign Minister, N. Hassan Wirajuda, points out that ‘interdependence is the key towards peace in East Asia’,\textsuperscript{114} and in order to maintain the momentum for further transformation of the Organisation into a more viable community, he stresses the need to foster ‘peace thorough security’.\textsuperscript{115} Recognising that ASEAN is slowly, but steadily, transforming from a mere regional grouping into a potentially more viable and less complacent institution, he suggests that, ‘to that end, ASEAN need to seek partners from outside the grouping’.\textsuperscript{116} As for Japan’s role in expanding the scope of TAC, he argues that, ‘it needs co-operation from outside the

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Nihon keizai shimbun}, 13 December 2003, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Sekai shuho}, 16 December 2003, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{113} Smith, ‘ASEAN’s Ninth Summit’, p. 430.
region; and since Japan is an old friend of ASEAN’, he considers Tokyo to be able to play a significant role,\textsuperscript{117} such that ‘Japan’s involvement in the security of the region can be enhanced through joining TAC’.\textsuperscript{118} While ‘non-interference’ is an overarching norm within the ASEAN framework, Wirajuda argues that the issue of whether an ‘advice’ from one member state to another necessarily constitutes ‘interference’ into domestic affairs is highly questionable—something that needs to be defined through relationship based on trust between and among the actors.\textsuperscript{119}

Thus, while ASEAN members share collective reluctance towards construction of a full-fledged security community, they are nevertheless becoming increasingly comfortable with the spread of ASEAN norms beyond the regional- and institutional confines of the Organisation. The decision by Japan, China, and India to accede to TAC in late 2003 may have been prompted, in part through, power-political considerations, as well as through pure national interests in maintaining influence within East Asia. However, it is also reasonable to suggest that without the spread of ASEAN grammar—or norm cascade\textsuperscript{120}—it would have been difficult for non-ASEAN members to sign-on to the TAC. Fluency in the language of ASEAN enabled Tokyo, Beijing and Delhi to further realise ambitions that were considered difficult to achieve. Yet, it is also the case that unless ASEAN members were willing to allow others to learn the language, this extra-mural expansion of ‘ASEAN Way’ would have been rather difficult.

**Conclusion**

‘ASEAN Way’ has evolved along with the Organisation itself: the anti-communist remit of ASEAN when it was founded back in 1967 had transformed into an institution seeking to be more inclusive after the normalisation of relations between the US and Vietnam in 1995. Furthermore, the altered international environment following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 provided further impetus for

\textsuperscript{117} Wirajuda quoted in Sekai shuho, 16 December 2003, p. 16-17.
\textsuperscript{118} Wirajuda quoted in Sekai shuho, 16 December 2003, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{119} Wirajuda quoted in Sekai shuho, 16 December 2003, p. 17.
ASEAN to reach beyond the regional straitjacket to encompass regional powers, such as Japan, China, and India. Of course, the post-9/11 process was never a two-way street: not only did ASEAN find regional expansion parsimonious, but Tokyo, Beijing, and Delhi all sought to pre-empt each other by signing on to the TAC. However, it was not simply a rational-choice convergence of mutual interests. More significantly, it represented a seminal moment when the grammar of ‘ASEAN Way’ has been exposed to, and internalised by, extra-mural actors, signifying the potency of a rather ambiguous concept.

It may be that the robust definition of ‘ASEAN Way’ might be difficult, if not impossible, especially given the manifestation of an ‘alphabet soup’ within ASEAN machinery. As Etel Solingen argues, ‘ASEAN can be understood as a cooperative regional framework traceable to converging internationalizing (rather than internationalist) coalitions’. However, perhaps it is this ‘fuzziness’ that holds the key to the resilience of such a nebulous concept, allowing the institution to undergo institutional change in its 40-year existence. This poses a challenge for the students of IR, and Constructivism in particular, as there emerges a need to develop both an ontological and epistemological tool for analysing diffuse intersubjectivity. The importance of taking ambiguity seriously has been underlined by the flexibility of ASEAN to come to terms with the changing international environment.

Perhaps it was this flexibility which allowed ASEAN to undergo regime transformation and yet maintain a semblance of coherence during the past 40 years. The inherent, systemic, ambiguity seems to have enabled the Organisation to be subjected to various transformations in the international environment, allowing member states to adapt themselves individually—as well as the group as a whole—to withstand many challenges calling for a series of re-definition involving expanding the scope of ‘Southeast Asia’ and ‘non-interference’. However, many challenges lie ahead, including persistence human rights violations in many member states. Now that the grammar of ASEAN has started including ‘human security’ within its vocabulary, along with increased interaction with extra-mural actors, the process of re-defining the parameters of ‘ASEAN Way’ an on-going project becomes an imperative. How much member states can stomach these changes still needs to be

seen; but its track record on reconstructing the intersubjective space has been rather deferential, yet never pedantic. Pessimism, therefore, seems premature.