Agenda Setting within ASEAN: Thickening, Broadening, and Breaking Pressures

Ryan Ashley

University of Texas at Austin

rashley@utexas.edu

Abstract

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a clear example of an "organized anarchy" within agenda setting literature; meaning that ASEAN has problematic preferences due to its multiple conflicting goals, relies on unclear methods to accomplish those goals, and experiences fluid participation of its members and leaders. This leaves the organization a case study in the path dependency of norms, as ASEAN typically defaults to its founding principles of non-interference, economic inter-connectivity, and regional "centrality" during crises. The research question was on the examples of variation when ASEAN broadens the scope of its mission. The research aimed to answer by framing ASEAN as a subsystem of Southeast Asian regionalism and conducting a comparative historical analysis of three case study periods: the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the failure to reach a joint communique in 2012 over tensions in the South China Sea, and the ongoing crisis of human rights and governance in Myanmar. The case studies demonstrate that the most effective broadening forces for ASEAN are exogenous. The conclusion argues that this is a problematic *status quo* for a regional organization that seeks to promote its centrality to counter interference from outside powers.

Keywords: thickening, broadening, breaking, path dependency, norms

Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was found in 1967 in Bangkok by the foreign ministers of Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Each of these post-colonial[1] and developing states attempted to head off the forces of the 20th

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[1]This phrase arguably excludes Thailand, the only Southeast Asian state not colonized by western powers.

century's global ideological conflicts, civil strife, and Southeast Asia's political rivalries. Considerably, they hoped to create a more stable and cooperative bloc that embraced a regional identity. To do so, ASEAN sought to rise above the forays of the mid-Cold War period by structuring itself as the institution "central" to the affairs of Southeast Asia, desiring all outside powers go through its auspices to interact with the region. ASEAN also gave itself a requirement for absolute consensus of all member states before adopting any new initiative, ensuring that even the smallest Southeast Asian countries would have their voice represented.

Nevertheless, since almost the day of its creation, ASEAN's consensus driven and low-key decision-making process and culture, frequently known as the "ASEAN Way," has sparked debate. The organization's supporters praise ASEAN's role as an inclusive, consistent, and stabilizing force in a region once known for none of these qualities. Meanwhile, its detractors point to ASEAN's seemingly lackluster responses to several economic, human rights, and security crises in Southeast Asia, often ironically resulting in further interventions in the region by outside powers. Regardless of these feuding perspectives, ASEAN's norms have acquired a nearly axiomatic status within the organization and the politics of the region. For example, *The Economist* described the October 2021 ASEAN Summit, held in Brunei, as holding a "decidedly sacramental quality," with religious adherents bowing to the "creed" of the "ASEAN Way" ("South-East Asia's regional club", 2021).

The research will provide a new perspective to understand the decision-making process known as the ASEAN Way by viewing it through a new theoretical framework, policy agenda setting literature. The research is organized into six main sections: a literature review covering previous analysis of ASEAN within organizational theory, a section covering methodology and the theoretical logic underpinning this research, three separate case studies highlighting key moments of crisis in ASEAN's history, and a conclusion discussing the larger implications of the theory of the research.

Literature Review

Previous scholarship on ASEAN's decision-making emphasizes the group's unique organizational culture and style of consensus building. For example, Atena Feraru charts the evolution of the "ASEAN Way" as a reflection of the evolution of informal procedures and the formal rules of the ASEAN Charter, both of which worked to promote the organization's seemingly contradictory goals of enhancing regional cooperation and consolidating national sovereignty (Feraru, 2016). Alice Ba also describes the importance of institutionalization of regional norms within ASEAN's auspices (Ba, 1997). However, as made clear by David Jones and Michael Smith, this complex series of norms and practices does not lead to meaningful security cooperation within the bloc, as ASEAN's internal processes remain decidedly intergovernmental and bureaucratic, rather than integrationist (Jones and Smith, 2007). The seeming inability of ASEAN to accomplish these goals leads scholars to apply varying policy and choice theories to the bloc, in an attempt to understand what restrictions may limit its

effectiveness. Yi-hung Chiou's application of rational choice theory to ASEAN's decision making, for example, shows that each member state's varying interests and decision-making priorities negatively impacts the effectiveness of ASEAN resolutions (Chiou, 2010).

Building on these insights, the application of another decision-making theory, policy agenda setting, provides a unique and applicable logic to understand ASEAN. Considering the relevance of three core concepts within agenda setting: the idea of an "organized anarchy," the existence of policy "subsystems," and the concepts of "thickening" and "broadening." First, an "organized anarchy," as defined by Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972), is any organization that: has problematic preferences due to its multiple conflicting goals, relies on unclear methods to accomplish those goals, and experiences fluid participation of its members and leaders. Understood in this framework, the "ASEAN Way" acts as a default setting for the organization's actions, providing a baseline of norms for the organization to act under during uncertain times. This, in turn, suggests that ASEAN is best understood as what agenda setting literature terms a "subsystem" of the larger force of Southeast Asian regionalism. Subsystems are those institutions that act as reflections of the beliefs, values, and policies of a larger system (Baumgartner and Jones, 1991), making ASEAN an institutionalized reflection of Southeast Asia's practiced norms.

Indeed, ASEAN purposefully lacks a crisis-ready decisive organizational and leadership structure. Alternately, ASEAN often responds to crises through yet another concept elucidated by agenda setting literature: by "thickening" or "broadening." According to Baumgartner and Jones (2005), thickening refers to the reinforcing of current norms in response to a crisis, while broadening describes the opposite outcome of an organization expanding the scope of its mission outside of its founding principles. In the case of ASEAN, the default response to crises is typically to thicken, i.e., promoting additional cooperation derived from its founding principles of non-interference, consultative consensus, and regional centrality. As such, ASEAN is sometimes criticized, typically by outside great powers, as a "talking shop," struggling to cope with a myriad of conflicting and overlapping priorities and jurisdictions. However, despite this criticism, ASEAN's norms have been crucial in transforming the region into an area largely (albeit not entirely) defined by peace, growth, and opportunity. Yet, all norms have a breaking point. In the face of several economic and security crises ASEAN has evolved and changed, occasionally even broadening. This research, then, will provide a unique and novel framework to understand ASEAN's decision-making by asking: why does ASEAN "broaden" its scope of responsibilities in the face of some crises, while "thicken" in response to others?

Methodology

The research conduct a comparative historical analysis of three case study periods of variation in ASEAN's history: the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the failed attempt to agree to a joint communique surrounding a maritime code of conduct for the South China Sea, and the ongoing breakdown of human rights and governance in Myanmar. In each,

ASEAN faced pressures from two primary directions: exogenous pressures to "broaden" the scope of its mission to include regional stability, and endogenous forces promoting a "thickening" of current priorities. All the while, some other exogenous forces sought to break the subsystem entirely. The case studies will demonstrate that, short of "exogenous broadeners" overcoming "endogenous thickeners," often using the threat of potential breaking as leverage, ASEAN typically thickens (i.e., reenforces its norms) or does not change its norms at all in response to regional crises. This theory of broadening and thickening is based on a framework of the same name found in Baumgartner and Jones (2005), which is typically applied to American public policy. The expansion of this framework to ASEAN can provide novel insights into the actions of international organizations and small states facing crises. A summary of the influences of all potential actors in this framework is found in Table 1.

Table 1 Influence of Potential Actors

	Thickeners	**Broadeners**	**Breakers**
Endogenous	Primary	Complementary	Negligible
Exogenous	Complementary	Primary	Disruptive

Theoretical Logic

Within this model, exogenous broadening is defined as any pressure coming from states or other external actors and its member states intended to push ASEAN towards expanding into new policy spheres to address crises, namely regional security. To paraphrase Baumgartner and Jones, such pressures are typically manifested in calls of "why doesn't the government [ASEAN] do something?" in response to a crisis (Baumgartner and Jones, 2005). Endogenous thickening is defined as any pressure coming from within the organization or its member states for ASEAN to contrarily address crises by reinforcing its norms (i.e., expanding on its existing institutions and initiatives) oriented towards regional consensus and economic inter-connectivity. To again paraphrase Baumgartner and Jones, "government [ASEAN] gets thicker when it increases its activities within a previously occupied arena" (Baumgartner and Jones, 2005). Simply put, most exogenous forces want ASEAN to broaden their scope, increasing their range of attention to security. In contrast, endogenous forces want ASEAN to thicken, increasing their capacity for building consensus and thus making the organization more central to its region.

While endogenous thickeners and exogenous broadeners are the primary actors of this research, four additional actors must be contextualized: endogenous broadeners, exogenous thickeners, and "breakers" from either direction. As for the first two, while such actors exist in ASEAN's international politics, the research paper treats such forces as essentially complimentary of the comparatively more impactful trends of exogenous thickening and endogenous broadening. Exogenous calls for thickening are typically uncontroversial, perhaps the best example of which being Chinese, Japanese, and (initially) Indian support for

the ASEAN-initiated Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) trade pact (Petri and Plummer, 2020). As such, while not within the scope of the research, RCEP is another example of the efficacy of the research framework. On the other hand, endogenous broadening pressures, such as somewhat frequent calls for a stronger regional security architecture by more China-skeptic member states, should be treated as a necessary but insufficient variable of ASEAN broadening. The research argues that such calls are only heeded when supported by successful and relatively larger exogenous pressures.

Similarly, while exogenous breaking forces are separate from endogenous thickening forces, their shared anti-broadening priorities can sometimes overlap. In times of strong broadening forces, this leads the former to act in complementary fashion with the latter. Defined as any state or organization outside of ASEAN or its member states that wishes to break down the organization as a subsystem, exogenous breakers are those actors who seek to keep the ASEAN from effectively acting in any policy sphere. A full breakdown of potential alignments between each actor can be found in Table 2. While some endogenous forces seek to break ASEAN, these are more commonly exogenous, typically in the form of countries who seek individual (i.e., bilateral) relations with the nations of Southeast Asia, rather than being forced to negotiate with the bloc as a whole. Importantly, the simple threat of an exogenous force to turn itself into a "breaker," or the stressing of the potential threat of third-party breaker, can act as a measure strengthening that exogenous (typically broadening) pressure. Table 2 provides more information on the cross-alignment of all potential actors.

Table 2 Cross-Alignment of Potential Actors

	Exogenous Broadeners	Exogenous Thickeners	Exogenous Breakers
Endogenous Thickeners	Unaligned *regardless of thickening*	Aligned and complementary	Unaligned *except against broadeners*
Endogenous Broadeners	Aligned and complementary	Negligible overlap	Unaligned entirely

Viewed through a model of strong or weak endogenous-thickening and exogenous-broadening pressures, ASEAN exhibits three measurable behaviors over four sets of conditions. First, in times of weak endogenous thickening and weak exogenous broadening pressure, ASEAN does not meaningfully thicken or broaden, and thus continues acting within its previous norms. Second, in times of strong endogenous thickening and weak exogenous broadening pressures, ASEAN chooses to thicken. That is to say, ASEAN reinforces its previous norms by strengthening existing institutions without expanding those to a new sphere. Third, in times of weak endogenous thickening and strong exogenous broadening pressures, ASEAN will "broaden" itself by expanding its remit into new policy areas. Lastly, in times of strong endogenous thickening and strong exogenous broadening pressures, ASEAN will default to its previous norms, with both forces negating eachothers' impact. A depiction of each of these outcomes can be found in Table 3.

Table 3 Endogenous Thickening Forces vs. Exogenous Broadening Forces

	Weak Endogenous Thickening	Strong Endogenous Thickening
Weak Exogenous Broadening	Continuation of previous norms	Thickening (Reenforcing of Norms, for example: RCEP)
Strong Exogenous Broadening	Broadening (Organizational Expansion, for example: ARF)	Continuation of previous norms

Each case study was selected to represent the greatest diversity across different combinations of these forces at work. Yet, seeing as the scope of the paper is to ask why ASEAN broadens when it does, each features strong exogenous broadening pressures. Breaking forces are also factored in; in order to determine whether the presence of a strong breaking force could serve as an alternative explanation for variation, one of the case studies includes such an actor playing in a primary role. For the first case study, the research argues that during the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum, the organization faced strong exogenous broadening forces that were met by comparatively weak endogenous thickening forces. For the second, the failure of ASEAN to reach a consensus on a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea in 2012 was an example of strong exogenous broadening forces from the United States and Japan meeting strong endogenous thickening forces (albeit backstopped by China's breaking forces). For the third, the ongoing breakdown of human rights and governance in Myanmar has led to ASEAN facing near-constant calls for broadening by powerful exogenous forces and some member states, yet those calls jostle with strong endogenous thickening pressures from within ASEAN.

The analytical conditions and outcomes of each case study are summarized in Table 4. As it demonstrates, the only constant independent variable during times of unsuccessful broadening despite strong exogenous broadening forces is a strong endogenous thickening force. Meanwhile, broadening has been unsuccessful despite the presence or absence of strong exogenous breaking forces.

Table 4 Case Study Overview

	Thickening Forces	Broadening Forces	Breaking Forces	Outcome
Creation of ARF	Weak & Mostly Endogenous	Strong & Mostly Exogenous	Weak & Exogenous	Successful Broadening
SCS Code of Conduct	Strong & Mostly Endogenous	Strong & Mostly Exogenous	Strong & Exogenous	Unsuccessful Broadening
Myanmar Governance	Strong & Mostly Endogenous	Strong & Mostly Exogenous	Weak & Exogenous	Unsuccessful Broadening

Case Study I: Creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (1994)

	Thickening Forces	Broadening Forces	Breaking Forces
Exogenous	Negligible	Strong (United States, Japan, Australia)	Weak (China)
Endogenous	Weak	Complementary	Negligible

Outcome: Weak Thickening + Strong Broadening + Weak Breaking = Broadening

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is a regional security institution bringing together twenty-seven countries on a near-yearly basis. It comprises the ten member states of ASEAN (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam), ten official ASEAN "dialogue partners" (Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia, and the United States), one ASEAN "observer" state (Papua New Guinea), and the additional invitees of Bangladesh, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Mongolia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Timor-Leste (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019). Functionally, the ARF focuses on five work streams, namely: 1) Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime, 2) Information and Communications Technology, 3) Disaster Relief, 4) Maritime Security, and 5) Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019). The breadth, depth, and inclusivity of the ARF grants ASEAN a uniquely strong convening power on security across South and East Asia. Yet, the ARF does not owe its origins to an internal ASEAN initiative. Considerably, the creation of ARF is the story of exogenous forces pressuring ASEAN to broaden into a new policy sphere somewhat unwillingly.

At the end of the Cold War, Southeast Asia was coming off a long stretch of successful initial thickening. Beginning with the first ASEAN Summit Meeting in Bali, Indonesia in 1976, the organization clearly prioritized economic growth and regional stability, best exemplified by the "Treaty of Amity and Cooperation" ratified by all member states (ASEAN Secretariat, 2015). To the extent that the organization discussed security concerns, ASEAN took a decidedly neutral and non-aligned stance, most notably through the creation of the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). This declaration, signed in 1971 by the original five ASEAN members, declared Southeast Asia should be "free from any form or manner of interference by outside powers," and called on ASEAN members to "broaden the areas of cooperation" between themselves (International Center for Not-For-Profit-Law, 2019). These norms-enforcing initiates and actions gave ASEAN its initial institutional heft, and helped forge the nascent "ASEAN Way."

Yet after the fall of the Soviet Union, ASEAN faced a new world order. This shift was largely positive, as the Cold War brought decades of inter and intrastate conflict to Southeast Asia. Whether in the decades-long wars in Indochina, the internal convulsions and genocides of Indonesia, or other crises, the region suffered a disproportionate burden of the era's ideological and proxy conflicts.[2] Therefore, with the Cold War over, ASEAN's energies shifted away from inward-focused thickening, largely in the form of accepting new members. From 1991-1999, ASEAN accepted Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam as observer, then full members. Vietnam's accession application was particularly striking, as much of ASEAN's origin story lies in regional opposition to Vietnamese expansion into Laos and Cambodia.

Yet, this endogenous shift away from thickening should not be understood as a shift towards broadening. Instead, ASEAN's growth is better understood in the context of ARF as representing a period of relatively weak endogenous thickening forces. While ASEAN's current members were interested in the bloc's expansion in the 1990s, placing more

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[2]For more on Southeast Asia's experiences of Cold War conflicts, see: Amitav Acharya, *The Making of Southeast Asia: International Relations of a Region,* Cornell University Press: New York, 2012.

conservative thickening forces on the back-burner, there was still far from a consensus in support of broadening, particularly into security. Indeed, the expansion of ASEAN can be apprehended as an act of thickening, as it represented growing the number of states in the region who agreed to abide by the organization's previous rules and norms. Nevertheless, because of these changing dynamics, endogenous thickening forces within ASEAN around this time are best described as relatively weak.

Indeed, despite ASEAN's desire for autonomy and predilection against outside interference, some of the region's largest outside actors hoped for the bloc to broaden into security. Most notably, the United States, Japan, and Australia each pushed ASEAN towards broadening, the former motivated by a desire to draw down U.S. military forces in the region as the Cold War ended. Facing the prospect of their most important ally withdrawing from their backyard, Japan and Australia began advocating for ASEAN to create robust security institutions in Southeast Asia in order to maintain a stable balance of power. At times, both Tokyo and Canberra made it clear that, if ASEAN did not act, outside powers may do so themselves, representing an implicit threat to act as a breaking force (Ba, 1997).

Yet, Japan and Australia consistently offered ASEAN the more appealing alternative of broadening, which was each country's true preference. As a result, neither should be understood as an exogenous breaking force. These actions are best understood as broadening forces attempting to use the tactic of breaking threats. This choice came from a sense of urgency, as each of these exogenous broadening actors was increasingly concerned by the security prospects of a rising China. Beijing's claims in the South China Sea were beginning to cause friction in the region, and the prospect of the sea turning into a "Chinese lake" following American military withdrawal motivated Japan and Australia to push ASEAN towards more meaningful security ownership of its territorial waters.

True breaking forces, albeit minor, were also at play in the formation of the ARF. While China was inclined against any external Southeast Asian security architecture, Beijing did not yet pose a credible breaking threat to ASEAN in the early 1990s. Most states in ASEAN perceived China in this period as economically focused and peaceful, yet still held resentment towards Beijing for its sponsoring of various inter and intra-state conflicts in the region throughout the Cold War (Ba, 1997). The early 1990s also witnessed a period of Chinese military expansion and modernization, featuring the construction of new military facilities on disputed South China Sea territories and acquisition of advanced military hardware from the former Soviet Union (Ba, 1997).

In particular, Vietnam was wary of Chinese security aims in Southeast Asia. Hanoi's suspicions deepened when, following Vietnam's signing of the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 1992, Beijing authorized the use of military force to stop "encroachments" on its territorial waters and lands, including disputed territories with Vietnam (Ba, 1997). China's skepticism towards the ARF was also centered in Taiwan, as Beijing feared that the regional institution could be used to force an undesired diplomatic solution to China's most sensitive overseas issue.

Put into action, the overwhelming nature of American, Australia, and Japanese exogenous broadening forces overcame ASEAN's relatively weak endogenous thickening forces. Despite its reluctance to expand into security, leaders from across the region began to openly state "their desire to see the United States maintain a presence in Asia," perceiving the same security risks as Japan and Australia (Tasker, 1992). These calls even came from historically non-aligned states like Indonesia, demonstrating the depth of ASEAN's desire to not lose the era's lone superpower as a security partner (Tasker 1992). Endogenous forces opposed to expansion into security did win certain concessions, including demands that the United States not attempt to open any military bases inside the region (Ba, 1997). Nevertheless, the exogenous demand for broadening, which included an implicit threat of potential breaking, won the day. While the ARF did not meet every exogenous demand, it was considered robust enough for the regional powers to back down from their breaking threats. ARF, then, formally came into existence following its inaugural 1994 meeting in Bangkok, attended by representatives from each ASEAN member and the ten official "dialogue partners" (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009).

To be sure, ASEAN's broadening into security via the ARF was relatively halting and incomplete. To this day the ARF provides a valuable regional meeting ground and security dialogue, perhaps the only of its kind in the Asia-Pacific region. Nevertheless, the ARF is, like ASEAN itself, frequently denigrated by outsiders as a "talking shop," incapable of sufficiently addressing Southeast Asia's myriad security challenges. Nevertheless, from an ASEAN institutional perspective, such criticisms belie the considerable leap taken by the organization to expand into security in the first place.

Case Study II: Failure to reach Joint Communique at ASEAN Summit (2012)

	Thickening Forces	Broadening Forces	Breaking Forces
Exogenous	Negligible	Strong (United States, Japan, Australia)	Strong (China)
Endogenous	Strong (Cambodia)	Complementary (Philippines, Vietnam)	Negligible

Outcome: Strong Thickening + Strong Broadening + Strong Breaking = Continuity of Norms (No Action)

Perhaps no Southeast Asian security topic garners more attention from outside powers than the balance of power in the South China Sea. A critical waterway positioned in the heart of the region, the South China Sea serves as a crossroads for roughly one third of all global trade by volume, and a majority of such trade for the advanced economies of Northeast Asia (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2016). As such, historically, outside powers that depend on access to trade via the South China Sea, including Imperial Japan in

the Second World War and the United States during the Cold War, exerted their influence over the waterway in order to maintain critical supply lanes.[3]

The American-backed security order around the South China Sea that began with the end of the Second World War persisted through the end of the Cold War. This maritime Pax Americana ensured that trade routes remained open, and the contested claims of various states, including China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines kept from boiling over. Nevertheless, this stasis did not last forever. Amidst growing Chinese military capabilities and a dearth of U.S. strategic attention due to wars in the Middle East and Central Asia, small disputes from 2011-2012 soon spiraled to form a tense security dilemma.

At the heart of these disputes is China's so-called "nine dash line," an expansive territorial claim by Beijing to own the majority of the South China Sea. As it gained more international confidence in the early 2010s, Beijing refused to budge from these maximalist claims, and rejected any interventions by Southeast Asian claimants as interfering in Chinese "internal" matters (Hayton, 2014). At an ARF meeting in Hanoi, Vietnam in 2010, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi summed up China's attitude regarding ASEAN's concerns in the South China Sea by stating "China is a big country and you are small countries, and that is a fact" (Mitchell, 2016).

In 2011, China stepped up its provocative military actions in the South China Sea, hoping to act as a breaking force against ASEAN's preferred security order. In February 2011, a Chinese frigate fired three shots at Philippine fishing vessels near the disputed Scarborough Shoal (Francisco, 2012). This was followed up in May when three Chinese patrol vessels clashed with a Vietnamese survey ship near the similarly disputed Paracel Islands (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). Most notably in 2012, China gained effective control of the Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines following a fishing ban in the area and the deployment of controversial Chinese law enforcement vessels to the area (Petty, 2017).

Throughout this period of provocations, Beijing focused its energies on breaking potentially adversarial subsystems like ASEAN, hoping to strike deals with other claimants on a bilateral basis. For example, China reached an agreement with Vietnam in October 2011 to create principles to settle maritime disputes near the Paracel Islands, a deal that was not negotiated via ASEAN. This strategy, sometimes referred to as "salami slicing," was favored by Beijing due to its denial of other claimant states' ability to collectively negotiate (Haddick, 2012). Divided one-by-one, each individual Southeast Asian country fared little chance against China.

Unsurprisingly, the regional powers of the Asia-Pacific region opposed to China, namely the United States, Japan, and Australia, pushed ASEAN to take a strong stance against these actions. Fearing potential Chinese hegemony in the South China Sea, each power encouraged the claimant states of Southeast Asia to "internationalize" the dispute (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). Ideally, to these exogenous broadeners, ASEAN would serve as a vehicle to pool each Southeast Asian claimant's grievances towards China. This would force

[3] For a more in-depth history of the South China Sea, see the opening chapters to: Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle For Power in Asia*, Yale University Press: New Haven, 2014.

Beijing to reach a lasting and multilateral settlement to the dispute. With the 2012 ASEAN summit in Cambodia approaching, each of these three actors sought to demonstrate their commitment to help ASEAN broaden to address the security challenge of the South China Sea. However, unlike in the case of the ARF, these exogenous broadeners never threatened to potentially break the subsystem were it to fail to act. Rather, they sought to promote the voices of potential endogenous broadeners, and lend them diplomatic support at the upcoming summit.

Nevertheless, for the claimant states of Southeast Asia themselves, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines, the issue was far more complicated than just a security dilemma. For one, China was (and is) a major trade and investment partner with all of the claimant states. Additionally, no Southeast Asian country held the ability to project meaningful naval power across the entire South China Sea. Rather, maritime states like the Philippines and Vietnam struggled to maintain parity with their Chinese adversaries to control disputed territories like the Scarborough Shoal and Paracel Islands. As a result, these countries agreed with the exogenous broadeners on internationalizing the dispute, calling upon the remaining six member states of ASEAN to ratify a previously-discussed "Code of Conduct" for the South China Sea (Thayer, 2012). Such a document would create maritime "rules of the road," intended to minimize the chance of any individual incident spiraling into a larger conflict.

However, ASEAN was far from reaching a consensus on broadening the organization into sponsoring a security code of conduct. Specifically, 2012's ASEAN host-state, Cambodia, acted as a strong thickening agent, complementing China's exogenous breaking force. Encouraged by China, Cambodia used its ability to spoil the bloc's consensus by refusing to sign onto a draft joint communique calling for ASEAN to act on the Philippines claims in the Scarborough Shoal and Vietnam's desire to address delineated exclusive economic zones (EEZs) in disputed waters. Controversially, it is widely believed that Cambodian negotiators even shared drafts of these agreements with Chinese representatives, breaking the trust of its regional partners (Bower, 2012).

In doing so, Cambodia did not seek to break the ASEAN subsystem. Phnom Penh is a long-standing beneficiary of ASEAN's largesse and economic support. Cambodia, itself, has survived as a state thanks partially to ASEAN's blessing of a United Nations security and governance conservatorship in the early 1990s that reshaped the country.[4] Yet, Cambodia's leader, Hun Sen, resented the power this give external actors in Cambodian politics. Thus, Cambodia likely aligned with China to stay on good terms with its largest economic benefactor, while simultaneously keeping ASEAN from expanding further into unwelcome security topics. Put simply, Cambodia preferred ASEAN to stay within its current policy spheres, and was willing to work with a pro-breaking China in order to achieve this goal.

Thus, in an unprecedented setback for the organization, the 2012 ASEAN summit ended without any agreement on a joint communique (Bower, 2012). Critics outside of the region

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[4] For more information on UNTAC, see a contemporaneous report: Trevor Findlay, "Cambodia: The Legacy and Lessons of UNTAC," *SIPRI*, Research Report No. 9, 1995, https://www.sipri.org/publications/1995/cambodia-legacy-and-lessons-untac.

cited the failure as another example of the bloc's inability to effectively organize itself as a subsystem (Bower, 2012). Internally, those member states determined to oppose Chinese claims in the South China Sea were forced to seek other methods of resolution. For example, without any formal ASEAN mechanism, the Philippines went on to seek international arbitration with China under the United Nations' 1982 Convention of the Law of the Sea, known as UNCLOS, in January 2013 (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2013).

Nevertheless, while ASEAN's norm of consensus led to its inability to reach a settlement in 2012, its norms did succeed in keeping China from breaking apart the subsystem. While the failure to publish a joint communique was arguably embarrassing for ASEAN, the fact that the organization persisted past this failure speaks to the strength of ASEAN's norms as a tool of convening and consensus building. Despite clear Chinese interference in the matter, Cambodia's unwillingness to sign onto any joint communique represented a clear lack of consensus within the bloc. While the outcome was disappointing to almost all members, and most exogenous actors, the fact that ASEAN persisted beyond this failure without breaking or resorting to intra-regional conflict speaks to the strength of the organization's norms, if not its ability to play effectively within the great power politics of the region.

Case Study III: Myanmar Human Rights & Governance (2010 – Today)

	Thickening Forces	Broadening Forces	Breaking Forces
Exogenous	Weak (Japan)	Strong (United States, European Union, Australia)	Weak (China)
Endogenous	Strong (Thailand, Cambodia)	Complementary (Indonesia)	Negligible

Outcome: Strong Thickening + Strong Broadening + Weak Breaking = Continuity of Norms (No Action)

Of all the regional security crises facing ASEAN, perhaps none elicits more criticism of the organization and its norms than the ongoing crises in Myanmar. Sometimes even referred to by media both within and outside the region as "ASEAN's Shame," Myanmar's three-pronged crises of the genocide of Rohingya Muslims, military coup against a semi-democratic government, and the post-coup intercommunal violence and near-state collapse present a daunting challenge to ASEAN.[5] It is also one of the few topics in ASEAN on which internal divides between member states on thickening and broadening are clear and apparent for external actors to see.

Several outside powers clearly want ASEAN to broaden in response to conditions in Myanmar. Specifically, the United States, European Union, and Australia all varyingly advocate for the organization to suspend Myanmar's membership, speak out against military violence, and provide some level of recognition for the in-exile "National Unity Government" (NUG) made up of former opposition figures ("Myanmar shadow government", 2021). These

[5] Examples include: Nile Bowie, "Myanmar's Crisis Becomes ASEAN's Shame," *Asia Times*, 11 June 2021; Richard Heydarian, "Southeast Asia's moment of shame," *Al Jazeera*, 20 June 2015.

moves would represent a broadening outside of ASEAN's norm of "non-interference" in member state affairs, as it would set conditions for minimum acceptable security conditions within member states. To be sure, few outside powers expect ASEAN to take concrete action, like military intervention, to stop the ongoing violence. Nevertheless, these powerful exogenous actors represent a strong force advocating for the broadening of ASEAN into a new set of internal-facing security norms.

However not all exogenous actors are advocating for broadening. Similarly to its role in previous case studies, China acts as a weak breaking force on ASEAN in response to the Myanmar crisis. Beijing has a complicated relationship with Myanmar's armed forces (frequently referred to as the "Tatmadaw"), but clearly prefers bilateral engagement with the government of the day over any hypothetical multinational or ASEAN-led mediation process (Myers, 2021). China covets access to trade routes that bypass the South China Sea (and, thus, minimize ASEAN's relevance), a benefit that a stable Myanmar could theoretically provide via the overland transport of goods from Southwestern China to the Indian Ocean (Myers, 2021). As a result, both China's strategic interests in Myanmar and practice of softly backing the Tatmadaw regime are evidence of Beijing's desire to break ASEAN as a subsystem on this issue.

Perhaps more surprising is the exogenous role of Japan. Tokyo has a long history of cooperation with Myanmar's successive military governments, dating back to Imperial Japanese backing for the nascent Burmese Army that soon developed into the modern Tatmadaw. As a result, Japan historically favors a more low-key approach in dealing with Myanmar, promoting an ideal methodology of improving the country's human rights through "positive" engagement. As a result, Japan is best described as an exogenous thickening force on ASEAN in response to the crises in Myanmar (Ashley & Silverberg, 2022).

The member states of ASEAN themselves are also split between thickeners and broadeners on Myanmar. For the former, the mainland Southeast Asian states of Thailand and Cambodia both variously promote engagement with and accommodation of the Tatmadaw ("West condemns Myanmar coup", 2021). It is perhaps unsurprising that each of these states host a government that is either highly authoritarian (Cambodia) or has a history of military coups itself (Thailand). Indeed, some commentators point to the "Thai Model" as an ideal outcome in the minds of Tatmadaw leaders; Thailand being a largely stable and economically prosperous country in which the military exercises political control through recurrent coups against undesired governments (Kurlantzick, 2021). For his part, Hun Sen, the authoritarian head of Cambodia, stunned observers after becoming the first regional leader to visit Myanmar since the 2021 coup in January 2022, providing a certain level of diplomatic legitimacy to the Tatmadaw government (Thul, 2022).

On the other hand, Indonesia serves as Southeast Asia's most outspoken broadener on the Myanmar crisis. Immediately following the 2021 coup, President Joko Widodo stated that the situation in Myanmar was "unacceptable and cannot be allowed to continue" ("ASEAN leaders demand", 2021), a stance much stronger than most other member states. At subsequent ASEAN summits to discuss the crisis, Indonesia advocated for the toughest line

against the Tatmadaw, seeking to punish the coup regime by limiting its access to the organization and denying its leaders legitimacy ("ASEAN leaders demand", 2021). Joined to a lesser extent by Singapore and Malaysia, this bloc of endogenous broadeners sought to expand past ASEAN's typical norms to improve the security situation of the region.

When this complicated mixture of forces clashed within ASEAN, the result was largely inconclusive. The most significant outcome of ASEAN's post-coup summits, the so-called "5-Point Consensus," is widely considered a failure. This initiative, agreed to by ASEAN and the Tatmadaw's leader Min Aung Hlaing in April 2021, called for an immediate end to violence in Myanmar, dialogue among all parties, the appointment of an ASEAN special envoy, humanitarian assistance by ASEAN, and the special envoy's visit to Myanmar to meet with all parties ("Factbox: ASEAN's five-point", 2022). Days after its acceptance at a 2021 ASEAN meeting in Jakarta, the Tatmadaw government recanted its support, stating that the agreement would be "considered" after "the situation returns to stability" ("Myanmar: ASEAN's failed", 2022).

As such, the result of the meeting of this confluence of thickening, broadening, and breaking forces was the failure of any force to overcome the rest. Rather, ASEAN largely defaulted to its previous norms, and has so-far let the failure of the 5-Point Consensus go without any meaningful consequences. As a result, the organization is once again receiving criticism from across the world for failing to act on a regional security crisis. In contrast, its boosters argue that ASEAN's most important attribute is its status as an inclusive collection of heterogenous states, and that allowing the organization to be redefined by such outside pressure would represent a failure of its core ideology.[6]

More important for ASEAN's prospects, though, is the reaction within Myanmar itself. Rather than continuing to appeal to the organization, anti-coup protesters are largely ignoring ASEAN in their messaging, instead appealing to international norms like the United Nations' "Responsibility to Protect" (often shortened to R2P) clause. This states that the international community must collectively intervene in other state's affairs when that state is "manifestly failing" to protect innocent people (Strangio, 2021). Protest signs across Myanmar often feature appeals to the international community to fulfill their obligations under "R2P."

This sidestepping of ASEAN as Southeast Asia's regional subsystem is not only limited to Myanmar's domestic politics. A United Nations General Assembly Resolution denouncing the coup on June 18, 2021 also split ASEAN into two diplomatic factions. Five member states, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines supported the resolution, and called for an arms embargo against the Tatmadaw. However, four other members which are Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Brunei abstained. Somewhat ironically, Myanmar voted in support of the resolution, a result of the country's U.N. Ambassador's defection to the NUG following the coup (Peters, 2021). In summary, the Myanmar crisis cannot be understood as either a thickening or broadening event for ASEAN, as the organizations norms have been

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[6] An example of this argument can be found in: Moez Hayat, "Give ASEAN Diplomacy a Chance in Myanmar," *The Diplomat*, 19 July 2021, https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/give-asean-diplomacy-a-chance-in-myanmar/.

neither reaffirmed or expanded in response. Rather, ASEAN once again fell back on its pre-existing norms.

Conclusions

ASEAN is best understood as a subsystem of a larger sense of Southeast Asian regionalism. That subsystem faces endogenous and exogenous pressures, and friction between these creates turning points for the bloc. Put simply, ASEAN is an organized anarchy as defined by Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972). As such, ASEAN is a case study in the path dependency of norms. That is to say, the organization defines itself by its norms and ideals, and typically acts on them when faced with conflicting endogenous and exogenous forces. Considering that ASEAN's norms are highly communitarian and consensus-based, the organization rarely broadens (as opposed to thickens) outside of them without exogenous pressure. Such broadening pressures sometimes depend on an implicit threat that unless ASEAN broadens, the subsystem may be broken.

This is a problematic conclusion for those who value ASEAN's norms and ideals. While two of the three case studies in this paper highlight the arguable shortcomings of the "ASEAN Way," this often-maligned system has ensured that Southeast Asia has remained relatively peaceful and prosperous since the end of the Cold War. Yet, all norms have their limits, and all organizations must inevitably adjust to the realities of a changing world. As such, this research's observation that ASEAN only successfully broadens when exogenous, rather than endogenous, forces are sufficient serves as a cautionary tale. The pattern observed in this research, ASEAN's protection of its norms through thickening, often itself results in the subsequent creation of future policy frictions. These frictions, then, often result in even larger punctuations of change when prompted by exogenous thickeners. While ASEAN has not expanded into new policy realms at the pace that exogenous actors like the United States and Japan would like it to, this conclusion implies that ASEAN would be well served to reach its own consensus on when such a move would be proper.

The research lacks a case study where endogenous thickening and exogenous broadening forces are weak, but exogenous breaking forces are strong. However, such a scenario, in which exogenous forces seek to break ASEAN into an organization that aligns with their wishes, is the exact nightmare scenario ASEAN was formed to prevent. The South China Sea crisis, which draws intense attention from powerful outside actors, appears to be the most likely scenario that could bring such an outcome. Were the security situation in the South China Sea to degrade to the point of military intervention by the United States and China, it seems unlikely either state would hesitate from breaking ASEAN as a subsystem to achieve their security aims.

Thus, ASEAN must prepare for the day where, unless endogenous forces prove sufficient to broaden, exogenous forces will seek to break apart its subsystem. Indeed, such endogenous forces can only exist in diverse international organizations like ASEAN thanks to

agreed-to norms. Otherwise, without such norms, there would be no such "endogenous" forces to speak of at all. In both case studies where ASEAN failed to broaden in response to a security crisis, actors within Southeast Asia chose to expand their grievance to the international community (Philippines to UNCLOS, Myanmar's protesters with R2P) rather than accept that ASEAN failed to reach a consensus. While these actions did not threaten to break ASEAN as a subsystem at the time, such internal frustrations could morph into a particularly undesirable force: a group of endogenous breakers dissatisfied with ASEAN's effectiveness as a subsystem. Thus, ASEAN must ask itself when it should make its own choice to broaden, lest it risk being broken.

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About The Authors

Ryan Ashley is a PhD Candidate at the University of Texas' Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs focusing on Japanese security relations with Southeast Asia. He is also an active-duty officer in the United States Air Force. The views expressed here are those of the author's and do not represent those of the U.S. Air Force, the Department of Defense, or any part of the U.S. government.

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