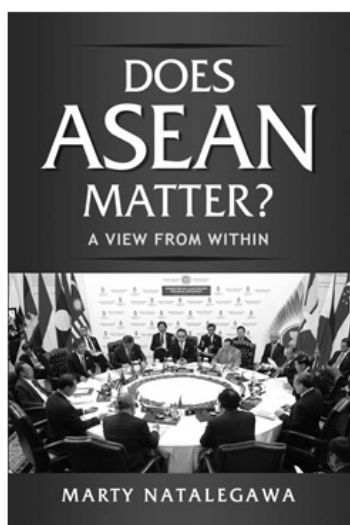


Does ASEAN Matter? A Book Review

Mohamad Rosyidin
Universitas Diponegoro



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| Title | : Does ASEAN Matter? A View from Within |
| Author | : Marty Natalegawa |
| Publisher | : ISEAS |
| ISBN | : 978-981-4786-74-4 |
| Year | : 2018 |
| Number of page | : 258 pages |

There have been abundant scholarly arguments regarding ASEAN and its role in managing interstate relations in Southeast Asia and beyond. This book offers a different perspective based on experience of former Indonesia's foreign minister. There is no theoretical framework employed by the author to frame his arguments. His arguments are expressed narratively supported by rich empirical data gathered mostly through first-hand or primary sources.

There are three key arguments proposed by the author. First, ASEAN matters because it has succeeded in developing of what so-called a 'culture of peace'. The existence of ASEAN enables the creation of conflict prevention, conflict management, and peace norms. ASEAN demonstrates that there is a synergy between national and regional interests. Instead of clash between sovereignty and solidarity, the relationship between national and regional interests is mutually beneficial. Strengthening ASEAN would never jeopardize state's sovereignty.

Second, ASEAN's centrality has become a lexicon in contemporary international politics, particularly when it comes to ASEAN relations with major powers. Using the logic of national-regional synergy, the author argues that ASEAN is able to balance between regional and global interests. At the global stage ASEAN has been playing crucial role as a 'norms entrepreneur'. Through this role, ASEAN is keen to engage major powers to build strategic partnerships based on mutual interest.

Third, ASEAN is important because one of its founders, Indonesia, is a key player in the region. Indonesia's role in ASEAN has contributed to the security architecture in Asia-Pacific with the concept of 'dynamic equilibrium'. This idea replaces the obsolete idea of balance of power which focuses solely on the logic of threats. Dynamic equilibrium has three main principles; non-military, non-hegemony, and norms-based conflict management. Within this framework, strategic rivalries between countries can be reduced. Conversely, states are encouraged to cooperate by emphasizing on 'common security' and 'common prosperity' as well as guided by the logic of 'strategic partnership' rather than 'strategic adversary' (p. 101).

Apart from these success stories, the author also mentioned the biggest challenge for ASEAN in the region; the South China Sea dispute. According to the author, the dispute is an ASEAN's 'litmus test' for several reasons; it tests ASEAN's capacity to deal with potential conflicts, it tests the nature of the Sino-ASEAN relationship, and it tests ASEAN solidarity given that several member countries are claimant states in the dispute (p. 134). ASEAN is fully aware of the negative impact of this issue to the regional stability. This is the reason why ASEAN initiated norms of conflict prevention so that it cannot transform into an interstate war. For example, ASEAN established the Declaration of Conduct (DOC) in 2002 and then followed by the Code of Conduct (COC) in 2011 when Indonesia became ASEAN Chair.

All of these success stories have made ASEAN a transformative actor in global politics. In order to play significant roles ASEAN should do two tasks. First, ASEAN should continue its role as a 'cooperative leader' in establishing global partnerships and cooperative relationships involving key global players. This role should in line with the 'dynamic equilibrium' conception which encourage a win-win solution based on common interests. Second, ASEAN should adopt a 'transformative outlook' which means it needs to convince others that pursuing collective interests is more important than narrow national interests. This idea does not mean that states should take its national interests away but rather balancing between collective and individual interests.

Despite the book offers good accounts of ASEAN centrality in the region and beyond, it suffers from several problems. First, the nature of

its approach. This book employs an elitist point of view toward ASEAN. The author considered ASEAN solely as a group of countries that live in harmony and full of solidarity in dealing with any challenge. It neglects issues at the grassroots such as human rights violations in Myanmar, violence against Indonesian migrant workers, terrorism, illegal fishing, maritime piracy, and so forth. Talking about ASEAN's success story is not just about ASEAN's role and reputation in managing inter-regional politics but also how it overcomes intra-regional problems characterized by low politics issues.

Second, the nature of theoretical lens. Although the author did not mention his theoretical framework, it is quite clear that he adopted an 'implicit liberalism'. The central argument of this book put more emphasis on cooperation and multilateralism based on non-zero sum game principle. In addition, the author was too optimistic by focusing on ASEAN success stories in co-opting major powers outside ASEAN as well as employing peaceful settlements. The depiction of ASEAN in this book is cognitively bias since it has a very little discussion regarding crucial issues faced by ASEAN today. As a diplomat, it is easy to understand if the author focuses more on the positive aspects rather than the negative ones. However, due to the bias perception the author tends to underestimate some major destabilizing factors in the region. For example, with respect to the South China Sea dispute, the author merely regarded the issue as a 'litmus test' for ASEAN. In fact, ASEAN is divided by China. Another example is gross human rights abuse in Myanmar to the Rohingya people where ASEAN did nothing due to 'non-interference' principle. Despite the fact that both issues are considerably the most dangerous problems faced by ASEAN today, the author did not consider it so. By avoiding this claim the author seems to prevent his own argument falsified.

Third, because of its elitist approach, this book does not discuss much about people-to-people issues. ASEAN community is not just interactions between countries but also between people. In fact, the ultimate goal of ASEAN Community is for the benefit of the people in Southeast Asia. However, this book only addresses this issue in brief. At the end of his book, the author acknowledged that ASEAN's people-centred issue might be "... the least understood and appreciated of all its activities" (p. 213). However, the author did not provide a solution to the problem. Instead, he only gave a very general and normative recommendation that ASEAN "should enhance its people-centric and people-relevant outlook" (p. 235). This indicates that from author's point of view, ASEAN remains exclusively owned by the government and has not reached the public interests.