



# IR-UI COMMENTARIES

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## The Art of Knowing How to Play: Realising People-centrism in a State-centric ASEAN

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### Summary<sup>4</sup>

How does the notion of 'people-oriented' and 'people-centred' evolve in traditionally state-centric ASEAN regionalism? What sort of challenges is ASEAN facing in adopting and implementing human security principles? Is there any way to get around ASEAN's perceived elitist decision-making process to promote broader people-oriented and people-centred agenda? This short piece will try to answer these questions.

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## Evolution of 'Human Security' in ASEAN

The notion that security should revolve around people, not only just states, did not come too late to ASEAN. Starting in the mid-1990s, ASEAN member states had already realised that the sources of threats to security had increasingly become more transnational and affected people of Southeast Asia in ways not seen before, requiring adjusted regional responses. Issues such as food security, environmental protection, sustainable development and transnational crimes e.g. human trafficking, piracy, and arms smuggling started to enter ASEAN's lexicon.

The emergence of transnational/non-traditional security issues coincided with the economic crisis in 1997-98 that put state-led model of economic development in the region under scrutiny. The devastating social-economic impacts from the crisis underscored the vulnerability of people in the region to non-physical threats. The crisis had also allowed the emergence of numerous civil society organisations (CSOs) in several Southeast Asian countries, determined to push for more democratic political and economic governance and in doing so emphasised the principles of human security.

The early introduction to the notion of 'human security', however, did not necessarily lead to smooth integration of the principles into ASEAN cooperation. For instance, despite the recommendation from the eminent persons group, which was tasked to provide broad policy guidelines for enhancing ASEAN regionalism, the notion of 'human security' was not mentioned in the 2007 ASEAN Charter, considered effectively as the constitution of ASEAN. The notion was also absent from the ASEAN community blueprints released in 2009. ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together, the organisation's latest roadmap for regional cooperation, has also made little progress in terms of mentioning 'human security'.

ASEAN's reluctance to make explicit references to 'human security' seems to derive from the perception that the concept is not compatible with the ASEAN's traditional approach to security. Most security concepts introduced in the region illustrate the state dominant discourse of security in Southeast Asia. Take 'comprehensive security' as an example. While acknowledging that sources of insecurity go well beyond military threats, as 'human security' entails, the region's 'comprehensive security' notion still puts a premium on state security. Thus, issues such as economic insecurities and domestic political stability are highlighted in reference to states. In other words, while accepting that the concept of security should be widened, ASEAN members are less keen to deepen it. Furthermore, ASEAN seems to be more comfortable with the 'freedom from want' aspect of 'human security' compared to the 'freedom from fear' which is associated with intervention.

State-centrism in ASEAN is also reflected in its decision-making processes. As an intergovernmental organisation, cooperation in ASEAN is still largely seen as instrumental for the promotion of self-interested member states rather than for the pursuit of the collective public goods. Moreover, it is well-known that ASEAN's modus operandi emphasises informality and non-legalistic approach as well as consensus and consultation in decision-making -the ASEAN Way. The adherence to the narrow interpretation of sovereignty and non-interference has also geared ASEAN members towards avoiding megaphone diplomacy and in favour of quiet diplomacy.

It is against this state-centric approach to security and decision-making process that ASEAN in the last couple of decades has emphasised the rhetoric of transforming the organisation to become more 'people-oriented' and 'people-centred', resting on three pillars: political-security, economic, and socio-cultural. Building upon, among others, the ASEAN Charter and the previous blueprints, the *ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together* reflects ASEAN's stated commitment to realise a 'people-oriented' and 'people-centred' community. The ASEAN Political Security Community Blueprint 2025 lists includes 'rule-based, people-oriented, people-centred community' as one of its characteristics. In a similar fashion, the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025 aims to realise 'a resilient, inclusive, people-oriented and people-centred ASEAN'. It is in under the pillar of ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, however, that the notion of a community that 'benefits its people' is most clearly articulated. Under these broad objectives, ASEAN members have also committed themselves to a wide range of initiatives, ranging from promotion of awareness of people-oriented and people-centred community to the narrowing of development gap to sustainable environment.

Despite these stated commitments, however, it remains to be seen how ASEAN members would actually reflect human security principles in their interaction and cooperation. Its state-centric and elitist nature, critics say, have led to a widening gap between ASEAN's rhetoric and reality. It is in the interest of ASEAN members to convince their constituents that the adoption of 'people-centred' and 'people-oriented' notions is not merely a compromise that ASEAN take in accommodating the human security principles within the established constitutive norms of the organisation.

## **Human Security and the ASEAN Way**

It is important to appreciate the nature and mechanics of ASEAN in order to get around the organisational conservatism -albeit evolving- and increase the odds of seeing human security principles meaningfully adopted in the region.

ASEAN's preference for non-binding commitments means that progress in strict senses is naturally difficult to achieve. The consultative processes that often rely on personal relationship among a small number of elite ASEAN leaders mean sustainability of agreed commitments and initiatives cannot be taken for granted. At the same time, however, the informal nature of ASEAN decision-making process means that it is not impenetrable by the pressures and interests from non-state actors. In fact, throughout years of its development, regional integration has benefitted considerably from the involvement of non-state actors, especially the regional epistemic community. The *ASEAN-Institutes of Strategic and International Studies*, for instance, is considered to have played a proactive and influential role in regional debates on economic and security cooperation in the region through informal diplomacy. There are also more recent attempts to develop networks of universities and ASEAN studies centres in the region.

ASEAN's administration and procedure pose further unique challenges and opportunities. On one hand, ASEAN's annually rotating chairmanship exposes variance in terms of how ASEAN

member states approach human security. Since 2015, for instance, only Thailand in 2019 that explicitly mentioned human security in its post-summit chairman's statement.

Indeed, among ASEAN member states, Thailand has been the most forceful voice in favour of incorporating human security principles in ASEAN. In fact, it was the late Surin Pitsuwan, the former Thai foreign minister and Secretary-General of ASEAN, that brought the concept of 'human security' into ASEAN dialogue in 1998 when he proposed to establish an ASEAN-PMC caucus on human security.

On the other hand, that ASEAN's annual chairman still retains substantial power in agenda-setting provides ample opportunities for interest groups to push for discussion on human security to be included in the agenda. If played right, non-state actors could influence the decision-making process in ASEAN by making use of informal channels, maintaining collaboration with ASEAN officials, and pushing for human security agenda to be discussed in regional setting during the respective chairmanship.

## **Reconciling 'Human Security' in ASEAN**

It is unrealistic to expect quick changes in any interstate organisation, not to say ASEAN with its long-standing norms and values. Given the nature and characteristics of ASEAN, the meaningful adoption of human security principles in ASEAN mechanisms would likely to occur at a very gradual pace. The good news is, as it has shown in the past, ASEAN will likely continue to show its ability to adapt and evolve to changing external pressures and domestic shifts in political norms and culture of its members. There might come a time when ASEAN is comfortable enough to talk frankly about human security. Having said that, there are several practical steps that can be taken to speed up the process of ASEAN becoming 'people-oriented' and 'people-centred' in its truest sense.

First, ASEAN member states need to strengthen their commitment to include all sectors of society in regional community building. As noted by a scholar, 'a true community cannot form (or form only so far) if inclusive identification with masses does not take place thus bridging elite consensus and identity to a broader mass identity. In the economic sector, for instance, ASEAN members need to ensure that further regional economic integration will also seriously take into account interests of smaller economic actors as much as the larger ones.

Second, the existing modalities for the involvement of non-state actors, including the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN People's Forum need to be reinforced. It must be assured that voices in these forums do not go unheard. ASEAN, after all, offers a collective venue to form a common position and develop concerted approaches to address issues that are most affecting people in the region.

Third, ASEAN need to further enlarge its decision-making landscape by including non-state actors beyond those that have been traditionally parts of the policy network and community. In order to accelerate this process, ASEAN member states need to provide stronger institutional support for more track two and track three initiatives.

Finally, from the civil society side, consolidated and committed networks at the domestic level of ASEAN member states are important as a prerequisite to be able to effectively push for the adoption of human security as part of respective states' agenda in regional cooperation. In this regard, civil society needs to develop and maintain collaboration with state officials in charge of ASEAN issues in their respective countries. At the regional level, civil society needs to further utilise the existing mechanisms for civil society involvement in decision-making process such as the ACSC/APF while promoting their expansion in terms of membership and substances.\*\*\*

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