Most ASEAN leaders and policy-makers will profess initial surprise at the inclusion of the Association in a conference about aspiring powers. This will likely be followed by gratification at the recognition afforded to the regional organisation’s international status. Apart from intra-mural reconciliation in the wake of the confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia, the main aim of the Southeast Asian states that founded ASEAN in 1967 was to boost their collective bargaining power and voice in the international system, so as to bolster their chances for relative autonomy and control over regional security. It would appear that ASEAN has been very successful in this aim over the last 40 years. But has it been so successful that it may be considered seriously as an aspiring regional or international power?

While it remains debatable whether ASEAN states themselves nurture such an aspiration, and whether the organisation qualifies for potential aspiring power status, ASEAN states have sought to develop and project their collective influence in a growing set of geographical and issue domains. We may identify three phases in ASEAN’s projection of diplomatic and normative power:
(1) During the 1970s and 1980s, after Vietnam invaded neighbouring Cambodia in 1978, ASEAN spearheaded an international diplomatic campaign to isolate Vietnam and to keep the issue of Vietnam’s illegal occupation of Cambodia on the international agenda. These efforts were concentrated in the United Nations, where ASEAN garnered international censure of Vietnam and support for the establishment of an International Conference on Kampuchea. Together with direct talks with Hanoi, this episode consisted of ASEAN’s most high profile international activism to date. However, there were tensions between two preferred approaches to the issue: Malaysia and Indonesia wanted a regional solution to the issue which would exclude external countries and emphasise a diplomacy of accommodation with Vietnam; while Thailand and Singapore wanted a more confrontational, international strategy that would raise the diplomatic and military costs of Vietnam’s invasion. The latter strategy prevailed because of the exigencies of ASEAN maintaining a united front internationally, but the Cambodian conflict was ultimately resolved only with the end of the Cold War.

(2) During the 1990s, ASEAN played a critical role as the foundation for the expansion of regional security dialogue frameworks to include the major powers, particularly China and the U.S., but also Japan, India and Russia. In this wave of new regional institutionalisation, the ‘ASEAN way’ – which emphasizes informality, consensus, non-intervention in internal affairs, and moving at a pace that is comfortable for all members – was projected as a means of multilateral engagement that was acceptable to all in the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Plus mechanisms. ASEAN’s occupation of
the ‘driver’s seat’ in key regional institutions is a mark of the institution’s dexterity in exploiting its benign role as intermediary among the great powers, and an important means of ensuring the organisation’s continued relevance in the post-Cold War context. Yet, ASEAN members have also differed on their preferences regarding the relative importance of these new regional institutions, and which Asian-Pacific powers ought to be included in them. The most recent example is the East Asia Summit, inaugurated in 2005, which China and some ASEAN members, such as Malaysia, wished to limit to strictly East Asian states, versus Japan, Singapore and Indonesia, which eventually prevailed in their insistence on including India, Australia and New Zealand.

(3) Since 2000, ASEAN has moved towards creating an ASEAN Security Community. Rather than being a security community in the Deutschian sense though, the emphasis here will be on comprehensive security, while re-negotiating boundaries of sovereignty and non-intervention. Discussions of how these ideas can be conceptualised and implemented, but this development, if successful, may be a potential alternative model of regionalism for other regions.

Each of these significant developments in the projection of ASEAN influence occurred in contexts of changing structural conditions, both at the international and regional levels. Uncertainties about the commitments or intentions of major powers, especially the US and China, as well as the expanding membership of ASEAN, spurred soul-searching within the organisation about its continued relevance in the regional and international contexts.
The task of tracing debates about identity and power in a 10-member regional organisation is obviously quite different from that in a single state case study. We may addresses the issue first by identifying specific states in ASEAN that have led in conceptualising and implementing the key policies and strategies discussed above: Indonesia and Singapore. While not precluding national debates within these and other ASEAN states, I concentrate on the different visions of ASEAN influence proposed by the leaders and policy-makers of these states, providing a more intra-regional than intra-national analysis.

There are essentially two related, but increasingly divergent, strands in the thinking about ASEAN’s power and influence:

The first school of thought asserts that ASEAN’s continued international relevance can be assured by the considered expansion of its political and institutional influence in the broader Asian region and in the world. By leveraging on its role as “a useful player on the international or regional scene… a catalyst and… a facilitator of instruments for dialogue in regional issues”, it can foster and lead wider regional security institutions.1 This expanding enmeshment of external powers and players within wider institutions running along ASEAN’s established principles and style is its principal institutional contribution to regional and international stability, and a subtle way of projecting its international influence. This school is promoted particularly by the Singaporeans, who emphasise ASEAN’s middle-man role. It also accords with the Singaporean foreign

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policy philosophy of ‘punching above its weight’ in spite of its small size. It has been backed by Thailand under the premiership of Thaksin Shinawatra, with the parallel aim of exploiting the country’s geographical location as a regional hub connecting Southeast Asia with China and with South Asia. This vision emphasises the payoffs from the multilateral institutional elements of power for ASEAN, such as the ability to influence regional agendas and to bind and socialise great powers without recourse to costly military instruments.

The second school of thought, in contrast, stresses that ASEAN’s continued relevance can be assured essentially only if the coherence and unity of the organisation is revived. ASEAN’s loss of direction since 1990 has been as much a result of its expansion to include Myanmar and the Indochinese states, and the devastating Asian financial crisis, as it has been affected by global structural changes. Thus ASEAN’s international voice can only be rescued by a form of ‘internal balancing’ – the re-generation of its intra-mural unity and coherence, by re-negotiating a new basis for collective identity. For this school of thought, led by the Indonesians, ASEAN’s own identity is in flux, and has to be re-written, before the organisation can harbour any further pretension to power and influence in the world. This vision incorporates as much the normative dimensions of identity as it does material dimensions, such as the economic and governance divides amongst ASEAN states. It has a much more restricted regional view of ASEAN’s potential power, in part because it reflects the dilemma of Indonesia’s quest for leadership in a divided region. This view is supported by Vietnam, which had embraced
ASEAN membership with the explicit hope of boosting security through collective strength and voice in the regional organisation.

These two schools of thought are, of course, not mutually exclusive. To be able to project outward its norms and values ASEAN has to be internally coherent, stable and strong. Moreover, the further development of ASEAN identity and norms will draw, as the region’s thinkers have done in the past, from broader security concepts abroad, then adapted to the region. This will necessarily make ASEAN more internationalist (though not necessarily more solidarist). To some extent, the tension between the two stands of thinking arises because of limited resources. But they also reflect a history of continual disagreements amongst ASEAN members about core issues such as regional autonomy and the relative salience of intra-mural versus extra-regional matters. These tensions have spilled over as ASEAN has expanded its membership, scope of activity and regional ambitions. While there is agreement that ASEAN can no longer afford simply to concentrate on the Southeast Asian region, but must attend more broadly to East Asian and Asia-Pacific security issues, it would appear that the unfinished and urgent task of internal consolidation will act as an important constraint to ASEAN’s ability and willingness to entertain seriously great power ambitions.