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# ASEAN's unchanged melody? The theory and practice of 'non-interference' in Southeast Asia

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# ASEAN's unchanged melody? The theory and practice of 'non-interference' in Southeast Asia

*Lee Jones*



**Abstract** The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is widely supposed by theorists and commentators of many persuasions to have elevated the principle of absolute non-interference in the internal affairs of states into a central pillar of Southeast Asian regionalism. Non-interference is also criticised for retarding ASEAN from taking meaningful action over economic crises, problematic members like Myanmar, and transnational security threats. This article critiques this consensus, arguing that the norm has never been absolute, but has rather been upheld or ignored in line with the interests of the region's dominant social forces. While the principle formally remains in place despite such challenges and serious instances of violation, it is now subject to competing demands and contestation.

**Keywords** ASEAN; non-interference; intervention; international relations theory.

## Introduction

Whatever their other theoretical differences, scholars concur that the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) never, or hardly ever, intervene in the internal affairs of each other or of other states.[1] Indeed, many commentators identify non-interference as the cause of ASEAN's inaction over many important issues, from the Asian financial crisis to the situation in Myanmar. This article critiques this near-unanimous consensus, arguing that non-interference has been violated repeatedly and

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seriously. Deploying a critical, historical–sociological approach to understand state behaviour, it argues that non-interference has been governed not by 'normative' beliefs nor by 'national interests', but rather upheld or ignored in line with the interests of the region's dominant social forces in maintaining particular social and political orders.

During the Cold War, ASEAN states intervened in domestic conflicts in neighbouring countries to help maintain non-communist social, political and economic order at home. ASEAN states' practices have since developed in line with the changing nature of domestic social conflicts, particularly the rise of powerful business groups which have penetrated and captured many ASEAN states. However, increasing pluralism and intensified conflicts within ASEAN societies, alongside the challenges generated by geopolitical changes and economic globalisation, has generated a series of increasingly powerful challenges to the non-interference principle. While the principle formally remains in place, it is now subject to competing demands and contestation.

The article proceeds in five sections. The next section outlines and critiques the existing consensus on ASEAN and non-interference, elaborating the theoretical framework used in this study. The following sections then consider the history of non-interference in Southeast Asia in theory and practice from the Cold War to the present day, showing how this has been determined by conflict within ASEAN societies.



## Challenging the consensus on ASEAN and non-interference

Whatever their other differences, analysts of ASEAN widely agree that non-interference is central to Southeast Asian regional politics. This section critically appraises this overwhelming consensus. An alternative theoretical framework is elaborated, emphasising social conflict as a means to explain the application and violation of non-interference.

The centrality of non-interference for ASEAN states is asserted by scholars of all theoretical persuasions. Constructivists argue that ASEAN created regional order in Southeast Asia by consciously cultivating the 'ASEAN way', a web of norms or a 'regional identity' into which member states have been 'socialised' so as to transform their interests, identities, and behaviour. These norms include consultation, consensual decision-making, and abstaining from threatening or using force, but non-interference is 'the single most important principle underpinning ASEAN regionalism' (Acharya 2001: 3–4, 16–21, 24–6, 57). Conversely, realists argue that regional order depends largely on great power balancing, and that ASEAN plays a far more modest role as a sub-regional forum moderating local tensions (Leifer 1989). They nonetheless concur with constructivists on the centrality of the 'cherished principle' of non-interference, asserting it was broken only twice in ASEAN's history: once in 1986 when ASEAN called for the peaceful resolution of political upheaval in the Philippines,

and once in 1997 when ASEAN set entrance conditions for Cambodia following a coup there (Leifer 1999: 35–6). Indeed, ASEAN's international prominence was founded on its defence of 'the sanctity of sovereignty' following Vietnam's 1978 invasion of Cambodia (Leifer 1989: 14). While criticising constructivism's other claims, contemporary realists still assert that 'the only "institutional principle" to which ASEAN adheres is that of non-interference' (Jones and Smith 2006: 167–8). International society scholars concur that member states have broken ASEAN principles, but only to defend their own sovereignty (Narine, 2006: 212–3).

Many scholars emphasise the 'regime security' benefits of non-interference, reflecting the general sense that third world elites have embraced 'rigidly demarcated and sacrosanct boundaries, mutual recognition of sovereign political entities, and non-intervention in the affairs of other states … third-world elites have internalised these values to an astonishing degree' (Ayoob 1995: 71). This seems borne out by the striking centrality of non-interference in ASEAN agreements and elite discourse, the ultimate source of this scholarly consensus. As Singapore's prime minister averred: 'we don't set out to change the world and our neighbours. The culture of ASEAN is that we do not interfere' (*Economist* 1992).

There is also general scholarly agreement that despite some 'intra-mural challenges' to the norm, non-interference has been 'maintained' (Haacke 1999, 2005; Ramcharan 2000). This is widely seen as deeply problematic. Non-interference is blamed for preventing ASEAN from confronting important problems like the situation in Myanmar, the humanitarian crisis in East Timor, and transnational threats like piracy and environmental degradation (Huxley 2002: 83–4; Rahim 2008). Scholars have warned for a decade that 'either interference becomes legitimate, or the Association will become increasingly meaningless' (Moller 1998: 1104). This consensus has informed and is in turn reinforced by journalistic and popular perceptions, expressed neatly in a cartoon mocking ASEAN's 'unchanged melody (Fig. 1)'.

This widespread consensus is, however, simply inaccurate. As one very senior Singaporean diplomat admits, 'frankly, we have been interfering mercilessly in each other's internal affairs for ages, from the very beginning'.[2] ASEAN's own former secretary-general, Rodolfo Severino (2006: 94), insists that the application of non-interference is governed by 'pragmatic considerations' and accordingly 'has not been absolute'. Indeed, most ASEAN scholars are forced to acknowledge historic exceptions to the norm. Overwhelmingly, however, the norm's dominance is then immediately reasserted, without any explanation for the apparent contradiction, generating serious, unresolved inconsistencies in ASEAN scholarship.

For example, Chin (2007: 397) claims that ASEAN's 'security community' rests on 'the so-called ASEAN *modus operandi* of non-interference' while identifying, on the very same page, the recent adoption of 'a "soft-interventionist approach … on seemingly domestic issues'. Constructivists downplay interventions as merely 'testing' non-interference (Acharya 2001:


*Figure 1* 'ASEAN's Unchanged Melody', *The Irrawaddy*, 24 May 2007.



108–16), and smoothly re-appropriate failed attacks on non-interference as evidence of the norm's power, offering only *ad hoc* explanations for such attacks emerging in states that have allegedly been 'socialised' into the 'ASEAN way' (Haacke 1999, 2005). Realists perform similarly. Despite acknowledging Indonesia's 1975 annexation of East Timor, Leifer nonetheless incongruously asserted that 'non-violation of national sovereignty is regarded by Jakarta as a central precept of any system of regional order' (Leifer 1983: 167). Other realists simultaneously report that ASEAN is 'bound by the cherished principle of non-interference', *and* has interfered in Myanmar (Ganesan 2006: 132).

Not expecting to find evidence of ASEAN state intervention, prevailing theoretical approaches lack the capacity to explain it, resorting to downplaying or explaining away intervention in an *ad hoc* manner. This article advances a more coherent account of the theory and practice of ASEAN's non-interference principle, arguing that the formal rule sits alongside decades of often very significant violations of it; and that both 'non-interference' and interventions can be explained with reference to the social conflicts animating ASEAN states.

Claiming that sovereignty norms coexist with intervention in Southeast Asia seems consistent with Stephen Krasner's (1999: 7, 9) argument

that sovereignty is no more than 'organised hypocrisy': in order to 'stay in power', cynical rulers make 'calculations of material and ideational interests' and violate non-intervention whenever this will 'promote the security, prosperity and values of their constituents'. This is a powerful and persuasive approach. However, because it is impossible for rulers to promote the preferences of all their 'constituents' simultaneously, we need to understand why some are selected and prioritised over others to produce (non)intervention. Yet Krasner provides no social or political theory for this purpose, perhaps betraying his prior judgement that states' foreign policies are autonomous from their respective societies (Krasner 1978).

One response to this shortcoming would be to adopt liberal theory's focus on domestic political coalitions and institutions (*cf*. Solingen 1998). However, liberal approaches neglect the way that capitalist development fundamentally influences the nature of social forces and the struggles between them. Patterns of economic ownership and control, for instance, deeply condition political conflicts and alliances, and the way that political power is used to constrain or enable the organisation of particular forces. Studies of Southeast Asia's political economy have long emphasised patterns of state-led economic development that have generated extremely powerful, illiberal, oligarchic capitalist classes which have used the state to disorganise labour and fragment challenges from middle-class reformists, even in periods of apparent political liberalisation (Rodan *et al*. 2006b). Thus, Southeast Asian states are not the neutral instruments of competing 'interest groups' that liberal approaches assume. Rather, they are expressions of power, formed through a dynamic process of social conflict, within a context of ongoing capitalist development and related geopolitical changes. States display an inherent strategic selectivity, marginalising some interests and agendas while promoting others (Jessop 2008).

This understanding of the state avoids realists' ideological move of glossing of the particular interests promoted by states as 'national interests', and transcends the 'regime security' approach. Even if leaders are cynical and want to 'stay in power', only an understanding of their countries' social relations can explain why they adopt particular strategies in order to do so, and why some fail. Moreover, 'regime security' is an unduly narrow view of what state managers are concerned with. Rather than simply clinging to office, most also seek to manage social, political and economic conflicts (at home and abroad, through means including intervention) in particular directions, inherently privileging some interests over others. Even attempts to 'maintain stability' are far from neutral, since some social groups clearly benefit more from existing arrangements than others. The key question is always: stability for what, and for whom? Explicitly identifying in whose interests power is exercised is crucial to avoid depoliticised accounts of political action.

This article's central theoretical claim is that the character of state power revealed by political economists is directly relevant for understanding the

international behaviour of ASEAN states, including (non)intervention. The meaning and application of non-interference depends on the strategies adopted by state managers to further the interests of dominant social groups against their domestic and foreign opponents. The overall coherence of non-interference at the regional level corresponds to the similarity of dominant forces' interests and strategies. This approach explains *both* the norm's emergence and persistence *and* violations of it, by identifying the interests around which 'hypocrisy' is 'organised'.

The article argues as follows. The next section maintains that during the Cold War, the predominant cleavage in ASEAN societies was between forces committed to and opposing the prevailing capitalist social order. Non-interference was developed to defend non-communist domestic social order, but serious interventions continued to contain perceived threats from radical forces that might destabilise this order. The third section shows that with the end of the Cold War and the rise of dominant business classes, defunct anti-communist interventions were wound down, but were replaced by new instances of meddling as business elites competed for the peace dividend. ASEAN states reinvented 'non-interference' to protect the illiberal dominance of these forces, but were compelled to intervene in Cambodia to counteract political instability there in 1997–99. The fourth section argues that, as a result of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, ASEAN's dominant groups faced an upsurge in opposition from below from forces including rioting peasants and workers, middle-class reformists, and Islamist and separatist movements. The perceived linkages between these threats to social order led core ASEAN states to support and participate in intervention in East Timor in 1999 to contain unrest in Indonesia. The fifth section argues that ASEAN states' efforts to regain international political and economic 'relevance' and to restore domestic legitimacy in the wake of the crisis has prompted core ASEAN states to try to discipline Myanmar when its actions endanger this process of renewal. Resistance from the newer member states, however, stemming from their own domestic conflicts, has prevented a decisive revision of non-interference, even as serious violations of it continue.

For the purposes of this study, intervention is defined as deliberate activity 'undertaken by a state, a group within a state or an international organisation which interferes in the domestic affairs of another state' (Vincent 1974: 13) in order to 'change or preserve' its 'structure of political authority' (Rosenau 1969: 161, 164–5). This encompasses not just military intervention but a broad range of activities, such as the sponsorship of anti- or progovernment forces, propaganda, financial sanctions and economic aid. This broad definition is particularly necessary since ASEAN elites frequently denounce even mere commentary on their internal affairs as 'intervention' or 'interference', terms they use interchangeably (e.g. Antolik 1990: 43, 79; Cotton 2003: 153). ASEAN states should be judged against their own supposedly strict standards.

## The Cold War: counter-revolution and containment

ASEAN's foundational normative documents – the 1967 Bangkok Declaration, the 1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality, and the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation – all affirm the binding principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states. However, rather than reflecting 'socialisation' into a 'cherished principle', it is the social conflicts then raging that explain this emphasis. During the Cold War, ASEAN societies were intensely divided between the defenders and opponents of the prevailing capitalist social, economic and political order. Embattled ruling elites enunciated a strict principle of 'non-interference' to bolster their efforts to maintain the status quo. Nonetheless, violations of the principle to thwart revolutionary movements seen as linked to 'subversive' elements in their own states continued, to the same end.

In 1967, the year of ASEAN's founding, all the member states' incumbent elites feared communist takeovers of their own or neighbouring countries. The Malaysian state was combating the insurgent Malayan Communist Party (MCP). The Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) had initiated armed struggle in 1965, and by 1970 its 30,000 cadres were effectively governing hundreds of thousands of people (Alexander 1999: 304). Thirty thousand communist insurgents were also active in the Philippines, with US intelligence predicting 'vast social upheaval' in the near future (Keefer 2001: 771, 783). A red scare also gripped Singapore (Lee 2000), and Indonesia, where the Suharto regime had just come to power through a vast anti-communist pogrom (Van der Kroef 1970: 51). ASEAN was founded in order to help defend the prevailing social order. Singapore's then prime minister explained:

> The unspoken objective was to gain strength through solidarity ahead of the power vacuum that would come with an impending British and later a possible US withdrawal … We had a common enemy – the communist threat in guerrilla insurgencies, backed by North Vietnam, China and the Soviet Union. We needed stability and growth to counter and deny the communists the social and economic conditions for revolutions. (Lee 2000: 369–70).

'Non-interference' was adopted to aid this agenda in two ways. Internally, it recalled ASEAN members to United Nations (UN) Charter and Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) principles to help stabilise their hitherto highly conflictual relationships. Intra-ASEAN conflicts, like the Philippine–Malaysian dispute over Sabah, were set aside to foster the stability necessary for the economic growth required to undercut the appeal of communism. Externally, 'non-interference' sought to insulate ASEAN societies from 'subversive' external influences to help stabilise capitalist social order. The urgency of this goal intensified as Western forces largely

withdrew from the region, granting communist forces a freer hand. ASEAN elites emphasised non-interference because they depicted domestic upheavals as flowing not from their own countries' social, economic and political contradictions, but from external 'subversion' by China and the Indochinese states, despite the very limited outside support they actually received (Huxley 1983).

This elite project of counter-revolution governed the scope and application of 'non-interference' in practice. While ASEAN member states ceased intervening against one another, collaborating instead against leftist insurgents through a network of bilateral security treaties (Antolik 1990: 76–81, 54–60), extra-ASEAN interventions continued in an attempt to contain perceived revolutionary threats. Thailand continued sponsoring Burmese rebel groups to fight communist forces in both Burma and Laos (Lintner 1999; Smith 1991). The Philippines and Thailand also sent troops and engineers to the Vietnam War, while Malaysia provided military training and civil assistance to the South Vietnamese regime (Lawler 2006: 640). Thailand also covertly deployed military forces in Laos (Girling 1992: 369–71; Lawler 2006: 39, 66, 114, 117, 123, 132 ff, 141, 177–9, 183, 197, 376ff), and sponsored right-wing guerrilla forces in Laos and Cambodia to try to block communist forces from coming to power (Chanda 1986: 380; Huxley 1983: 16). Indonesia also volunteered to funnel US-made weapons covertly to Cambodia, offered 'peacekeepers' to prevent a communist takeover, and hosted an aid conference for Lon Nol's anti-communist regime (Lawler 2006: 617, 619, 634–5, 640–1, 663–9, 679; US State Department 1970a, 1970b). At this conference, Suharto sought 'an ASEAN intervention in Cambodia' to prop up Lon Nol, with Malaysia and Singapore only demurring due to their military and economic weakness after Britain's withdrawal.[3] Indochina's non-communist regimes were nonetheless admitted to ASEAN as official observers as a sign of moral support (Severino 2006: 48).

None of these measures could prevent the ascent to power of communist forces in and US withdrawal from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. These developments boosted ASEAN's communist insurgencies, generating elite panic. Intensified MCP activities climaxed with the bombing of Malaysia's national monument in August 1975. In Thailand, waves of strikes and urban unrest had overthrown the military regime in 1973, but now the monarchy and army violently suppressed the left, restoring the dictatorship and prompting thousands to join the CPT insurgency (Anderson 1998: 171 ff). Rejecting ASEAN's veneer of non-interference, Hanoi proclaimed its solidarity with 'all forces struggling for independence, democracy, peace and social progress', including 'the Thai people's struggle for a really independent and democratic Thailand'. Bangkok therefore continued sponsoring right-wing Cambodian and Laotian guerrillas, and the Indochinese states increased their support for the CPT (Huxley 1983: 2–18).

This was the crucial context for Indonesia's annexation of East Timor later that year. Portugal had begun decolonising the territory in late 1974. Jakarta feared that impoverished East Timor would seek aid from Moscow

or Beijing, thus creating a 'communist' enclave that would destabilise Indonesian society by smuggling exiled communists back into Indonesia and aiding separatist insurgencies (Singh 1996: 23–102). Elite paranoia was heightened by serious contemporaneous urban unrest which exposed fractures within the Suharto regime, and the emergence in East Timor of Frente Revolucionária de Timor–Leste Independente (FRETILIN), a radical independence movement (Anderson 1995: 138–41). Having failed to subvert the territory by sponsoring a campaign for its integration into Indonesia, Jakarta forged an alliance of anti-FRETILIN groups, the *Movimento Anti-Communista*, backing a military conflict which escalated into a full-scale Indonesian invasion and annexation of the territory (Dunn 1983: ch. 4–11). Notwithstanding Singapore's brief demurral, ASEAN states backed these moves at the UN and NAM. Malaysia was particularly supportive, broadcasting its support for Indonesian actions and covertly supplying arms to Jakarta (Inbaraj 1995: ch. 2–4; Roff 1992: 54, 61–2, 66; Van Dijk 1976).

ASEAN's counter-revolutionary panic subsided after 1975, particularly as the Indochinese states quickly began fighting amongst themselves. The Khmer Rouge (KR) regime began launching brutal raids on Vietnam, and to protect its rear, curried favour with ASEAN, affirming it had 'no interest in promoting revolution outside Cambodia' (Huxley 1983: 19). However, when the Pol Pot regime was overthrown by Cambodian resistance fighters and Vietnamese forces in December 1978, ASEAN's buffer was lost, creating the fear that Hanoi's long-anticipated revolutionary expansion into mainland Southeast Asia had begun.

ASEAN rallied to condemn and isolate Vietnam and its new 'puppet regime' in Cambodia. Its confrontation of Hanoi took the form of defending sovereignty and non-intervention, but its real goal was to defend ASEAN's precarious capitalist social orders by fuelling conflict within Cambodia and keeping Vietnam pinned down. ASEAN and China rebuilt the forces of the KR and the anti-communist guerrilla groups now based in Thailand. Bangkok shipped arms worth $100 million a year to the deposed regime, while international aid for Cambodian refugees was appropriated by the guerrillas. ASEAN successfully defended the KR's occupancy of Cambodia's UN seat, later forcing the guerrilla groups into a new coalition government-in-exile. With the US, ASEAN states armed and supplied the anti-communist factions, hoping to manoeuvre them into power in Phnom Penh if and when Vietnam withdrew. In exchange for ASEAN's support against Hanoi, China stopped supporting ASEAN's communist insurgencies, and instead supplied valuable aid to the Thai government. Coupled with renewed US support, this helped the Thai military to defeat the CPT (Jones 2007: 523–34). The stabilisation of capitalist social order in Thailand, a crucial 'domino' that did not fall, in turn stabilised the rest of ASEAN.

Thus, during the Cold War, far from clinging to a 'cherished principle' or being 'socialised' into a 'norm of non-interference', ASEAN states were principally engaged in defending a particular social order, prioritising the interests of the region's incipient bourgeoisies and their allies in the

state apparatuses over those struggling against the status quo. Elites called for non-interference in states' internal affairs, but when adhering to this principle would have undermined their fundamental goal of maintaining social order, it was discarded in favour of counter-revolutionary intervention.

## From Cold War to crisis: the rise of capital

As communism was defeated and the masses were suppressed, the nature of state power in Southeast Asia fundamentally transformed in the late 1980s. A new capitalist oligarchy, nurtured by ASEAN's anti-communist, developmental states, began displacing their military–bureaucratic allies to increase their own wealth and influence. This section shows how non-interference was reconfigured to protect these domestic power relations from the West's liberalising agenda, how anti-communist interventions were wound down to allow the business class to tap new markets, and how intra-elite conflict over the peace dividend produced continued meddling in states' internal affairs.

By the early 1990s a new class of business oligarchs had directly captured state power across the region to secure direct access to governmental largesse.

In the Philippines the Marcos dictatorship was overthrown in 1986, defusing the leftist challenge to his rule and facilitating the restoration of 'elite democracy' dominated by economically powerful families (Hutchison 2006: 53–8). Thailand's military regime was replaced in 1988 by a deeply corrupt parliamentary system dominated by parties serving as vehicles for particular business factions (Hewison 1996). In Malaysia, networks of state-nurtured 'tycoons' arose to dominate the ruling party, the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) (Gomez 2002). The Indonesian military's economic and political domination was gradually displaced by a vast, cronyist network of conglomerate owners centred on Suharto (Robison 1986). Singapore's remarkably coherent elite exercised hegemony over both politics and the economy (Rodan 1993).

These developments implied two changes for 'non-interference'. First, as communist forces were defeated domestically – and, with the end of the Cold War, internationally – non-interference's anti-communist rationale evaporated. The new threat to ASEAN states' illiberal, inequitable and corrupt political and socio-economic structures was a perceived alliance between reformist, middle-class forces demanding liberalisation and Western powers, which were now engaged in promoting market democracy and human rights. As Malaysia's prime minister warned:

> Before, it was the Communists who stirred up rebellion everywhere … Now we have the liberal democrats doing exactly the same in the same manner, complete with supplies of arms. Whether it is a

> communist or a liberal democratic insurrection, the people suffer not one bit less. (Mahathir 1999: 7)

Non-interference was thus re-deployed to insulate ASEAN's domestic governance structures from internal and external challenges, alongside the 'Asian values' discourse, which served the same purpose (Robison 1996).

Ensuring this underlying goal sometimes involved ASEAN states not just in the coercion of domestic opponents, but also each other. For example, in 1994, the non-governmental Asia-Pacific Conference on East Timor was due to convene in Manila in order to criticise Indonesia's occupation of the territory. The enraged Suharto regime raised the spectre of renewed civil war in the Philippines by threatening to cease mediating between Manila and Muslim rebel groups, cancelling joint ventures and trade deals worth $700 million, and sponsoring a front group of Philippine oligarchs to attack the conference organisers. The Philippine government abandoned its initially liberal posture and tried to suppress the conference, barring all foreign participants from the country, and banned any similar future events. Jakarta's crude bullying also ensured a similar response from the other ASEAN states (Inbaraj 1995: 129–80; Land 1994; Miclat 1995).

The second main consequence of the rise of capital was the transformation of ASEAN's policies towards Indochina and Myanmar. ASEAN states' counter-revolutionary interventions in these countries now served no useful function. Indeed, they impeded the new capitalist elite, who had large stocks of capital to invest and urgently needed to source raw materials. The oligarchs thus used their control of state power to wind down these interventions and turn 'battlefields into marketplaces' (Innes-Brown and Valencia 1993). This was powerfully aided by the settling of the Cambodian conflict in 1991. By the mid-1990s, ASEAN investors were among the largest in Myanmar and Cambodia (Jones 2007: 535; Jones 2008: 273).

However, the normalisation of relations with Myanmar and Cambodia was undermined by Thai generals and state-linked businessmen who had benefited from the conflicts by smuggling arms and goods through various Bangkok-backed guerrilla groups. The black market trade with Cambodia through one province alone was estimated at $15–20 million per month by 1989 (Van der Kroef 1990: 231), while the combined annual value of drugs, weapons and arms smuggled through Burmese rebel groups around this time was estimated at around $5 billion (Lintner 1999: 403; Maung Aung Myoe 2001: 58). Thailand's business–military networks refused to terminate this lucrative trade. In Cambodia, they continued to support the KR into the late 1990s to maintain access to resources under their control, which enabled the KR to relaunch Cambodia's civil war in 1994 (Jones 2007: 535, n. 9; Rungswasdisab 2006: 103–11). Similar networks continued their involvement with Burma's rebel groups, and Thai army units could even be bribed to intervene in battles along the border, compounding Myanmar's internal instability (Maung Aung Myoe 2001: 50–2).

Social conflict within ASEAN states thus continued to produce intervention in the affairs of other nations, even against official policy, reflecting the linkages between different parts of various states and powerful social forces. Indeed, 'the highly instrumental nature of capitalist control of state power' in Southeast Asia (Rodan *et al*. 2006a: 25) even allows individual tycoons to use state apparatuses to further their own interests, sometimes in an interventionist manner. For example, Thai oligarch Thaksin Shinawatra's ShinCorp firm was directly implicated, alongside officers of Thailand's National Security Council, in a bungled coup attempt against Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen in 1994, designed to advance the business interests of Thaksin and his allies (Adams 2007).[4]

These episodes exacerbated the instability of Cambodia's ruling coalition, which comprised the modern incarnations of the old communist regime, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), and Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique et Cooperatif (FUNCINPEC), an anti-communist guerrilla group earlier sponsored by ASEAN. The influx of state-linked ASEAN capital intensified intra-coalitional competition for patronage resources ahead of the 1998 elections, with the CPP winning (Peou 2000: 373; Widyono 2008: 201–3). The desperate and disintegrating FUNCINPEC therefore allied with the insurgent KR against the CPP. This precipitated a violent breakdown of the coalition in July 1997, despite growing pressure from ASEAN governments for the parties to resolve their differences. In response, Western states stripped the aid-dependent government of foreign assistance and ejected Cambodia from its UN seat.

ASEAN intervened to resolve this crisis by postponing Cambodia's pending admission to ASEAN and imposing a series of conditions for its entry, which became linked to the restoration of Western aid. These conditions included the rescheduling and holding of elections, a royal pardon and top political job for Ranariddh, the formation of a new coalition government, and the creation of a new senate (Jones 2007: 535–41). Hun Sen's repeated protestations that ASEAN was interfering in Cambodia's internal affairs were ignored. ASEAN intervened to keep Cambodia's marketplaces from degenerating back into battlefields, and to defend the Association's international standing, which was largely 'earned' through its prior intervention in Cambodia. Indeed, this legacy meant that 'Indonesia felt that … it was entitled to pick up the broken pieces', explained then-foreign minister Ali Alatas, who headed ASEAN's 'Troika' missions.[5] Thailand's then-UN ambassador concurs:

> We actually interfered … [Because] we set up the state, the rules, the conditions, and we built Cambodia … we felt that Cambodia was 'our baby' … we took a lot of trouble to set up the international conference on Cambodia, we fought many years against the Vietnamese … So it was our special interest.[6]

It is therefore mistaken to take the heightened elite rhetoric about non-interference in this period as proxy evidence for actual non-interference. Non-interference was maintained to fend off criticism of ASEAN states' illiberal internal power structures. But even as Cold War-era interventions were wound down, social conflict within ASEAN states continued to produce interference in other countries' affairs.

## ASEAN in crisis: the interdependence of social orders

The 1997 Asian financial crisis plunged Southeast Asia into economic chaos, with currencies collapsing and national economies sharply contracting. Indonesia especially saw generations of development undone, with five million jobs disappearing and absolute poverty soaring to 70 per cent. The International Monetary Fund's (IMF) bailout conditions exacerbated the crisis and attacked the region's cronyist state–business relations; violent social unrest erupted across the region (Sukma 1999). This section explores the consequences of the crisis for 'non-interference', arguing that, while efforts to formally dilute the norm failed, ASEAN states nonetheless promoted and joined international intervention in East Timor in 1999 to contain social unrest in Indonesia.

The crisis severely destabilised the constellations of social forces constituting ASEAN regimes and states. Thailand's discredited oligarchic government was forced aside by the Democrat Party, which, reflecting its middle-class base and neoliberal ideology, sought fundamental reform of Thailand's state and economy. The Democrats also called for 'non-interference' to be explicitly revised to permit intra-ASEAN 'peer pressure' to push member states into adopting similar reforms, which they deemed necessary for regional economic recovery (Surin 1998). Two factors defeated this 'flexible engagement' proposal. First, intra-ASEAN tensions caused by the crisis had already generated serious violations of non-interference, such as Malaysian threats to punish Singapore's vocal support for IMF-imposed reforms in the region by severing its water supply (Henderson 1999: 53; Lee 2000: 310–9, 386), leading elites to fear what might happen if the norm was officially diluted.

Secondly, while liberalising, middle-class forces were temporarily ascendant in Thailand, their counterparts elsewhere were facing rearguard action by entrenched elites. Intensified competition for the dwindling spoils of the Malaysian state, for instance, had fractured the UMNO-led government. Anwar Ibrahim's reformist faction was purged, spawning a middle-class *reformasi* movement protesting 'corruption, collusion, and nepotism' (Gomez 2002: 105–11). This movement drew clear inspiration from Indonesia, where a combination of middle-class protests, mass unrest, anti-Chinese pogroms, and donor-country pressure had forced Suharto from power (Anwar 2002). Faced with such political challenges arising from the economic maelstrom, ruling oligarchs wished to retain the shield of 'non-interference' as they struggled to retain domination.

Nonetheless, these developments had momentous consequences for East Timor, a case which illustrates how intervention continued even as non-interference was officially retained. As Indonesian oligarchs scrambled to salvage their corporate empires and capture the country's emerging democratic institutions, Suharto's successor, President Habibie, decided to ease Western pressure by offering a referendum on independence in East Timor (O'Rourke 2002). The Indonesian army had long dominated the economy of East Timor and other restive provinces which might take inspiration from Timorese independence, and were deeply ideologically committed Indonesia's territorial integrity. It consequently initiated a violent campaign, alongside local pro-Indonesian militias, to intimidate the Timorese into voting for regional autonomy instead. When they nonetheless opted for independence, the military razed the territory, displacing nearly the entire population and precipitating a major humanitarian crisis (Tanter *et al*. 2006).

ASEAN is generally pilloried for its inaction in response to this crisis, which is said to have stemmed from the non-interference principle (Huntley and Hayes 2000; McDougall 2001; Narine 2005; Sebastian and Smith 2000). Some, furthermore, accuse states like Malaysia of actively trying to block Western efforts to launch a humanitarian intervention (Dupont 2000: 165; Eldon 2004: 554; McDougall 2001: 176). The facts, however, suggest otherwise. Malaysia's prime minister and other ASEAN leaders flatly stated that the referendum outcome must be respected, not overturned (Associated Press 1999). Just two days after the result was announced, Malaysia and Thailand became the first countries in the world to offer peacekeeping troops, joined two days later by Singapore (AFP 1999d; BBC SWB 1999a; Bernama 1999; Kyodo 1999b). Despite scholars emphasising ASEAN's insistence on Indonesian consent for any intervention, this was also the clear position of all Western states (*Asiaweek* 1999a, 1999b). While Malaysia's UN ambassador joined a mission to persuade Jakarta to accept a peacekeeping intervention, other core ASEAN states insisted that the violence there must be stopped. Singapore, the most vocal, stated it was 'shocked and outraged', sharply criticised Jakarta's mishandling of the issue, warned of a 'grave precedent' if the UN failed to intervene, and urged Jakarta to accept peacekeepers (Mahbubani 1999: 19–21).

Thailand was meanwhile rallying ASEAN contributions for a prospective intervention force, at Jakarta's behest (Surin, 2002). Although Myanmar and the Indochinese states declined to participate, ASEAN personnel nonetheless comprised a quarter of the International Force for East Timor (INTERFET) (Dupont 2000: 167). Far from being hostile to intervention, Malaysia openly called for an ASEAN-led intervention in East Timor. It scaled back its contribution to a token level not because it opposed intervention, but because its repeated bids to supplant Australia as mission commander was thwarted by Timorese resistance (AFP 1999b; *International Herald Tribune* 1999; Xinhua 1999). ASEAN forces also comprised around one-fifth of the peacekeeping element of the subsequent UN Transitional

Authority in East Timor (UNTAET), which was commanded first by a Philippine and later a Thai general (UNTAET 2000: 17). UNTAET's successor mission, UNMISET, was later commanded by a Singaporean and then a Malaysian general.

Consequently, it is incorrect to suggest that ASEAN states were paralysed by 'non-interference'. Certainly, a corporate response was impossible because of the reluctance of some member states. However, to suggest that this was due to ASEAN norms ignores the fact that it was those states with least experience of ASEAN 'socialisation' that were least comfortable with violating non-interference, and vice-versa. The newer member states' position would be better explained with reference to their specific social orders, which, while fragile, were not seen as directly imperilled by events in Indonesia (see next section).

Conversely, core ASEAN countries' state managers believed that restoring their domestic social and economic orders depended directly on order being restored in Indonesia. Thailand's currently ascendant liberal middle-class saw a need to contain unrest physically in the short term and politically in the long term, in line with their preference for thoroughgoing, neoliberal reform. As the Thai foreign minister's senior aide later explained, Bangkok intervened

> to maintain regional peace and stability, since unrest and instability in East Timor could impact on regional security … unless each country in the region … puts its house in order, domestic instability could continue to affect the region as a whole. In a world of greater interdependence, each country has the responsibility to foster greater transparency and accountability, so that rising expectations at home could be met and domestic problems could be contained within national boundaries. (Noppadon 2000: 35–6)

Philippine motivations sprang from more concrete concerns. Much to elite consternation, shortly after East Timor's referendum, the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front declared its intention to seek a similar ballot in Mindanao. Manila explained its peacekeeping contributions were to 'pay back' Jakarta for its previous assistance in Mindanao, maintain regional support for its suppression of the rebels, and to contain the unrest in East Timor to prevent it spreading via massive refugee flows (AFP 1999a, 1999c; De Los Santos and Burgos 2001: 82; Kyodo 1999a; *Manila Bulletin* 2000). Malaysian and Singaporean elites concurred on the refugee issue, since their countries were already hosting many Indonesian emigrants who were blamed for social ills and causing serious interstate tensions (Huxley 2002: 75, 79, 81–2). Singapore and Thailand also emphasised the market instability caused by Indonesia's turmoil, arguing that ASEAN's economic recovery depended on order being restored there (BBC SWB 1999b; *Newsweek* 1999). This generated a desire to, as one senior Singaporean diplomat put

it, 'at least contain that problem [East Timor] so the bigger issues could be dealt with'.[7]

In the period immediately following the financial crisis, therefore, Thailand's failure to reformulate ASEAN's non-interference principle did not mean that interventions ceased. In fact, the crisis reinforced perceptions that ASEAN states' domestic socio-economic and political orders were interdependent, prompting further intervention to restore the stability necessary for the region's battered economy to recover.

## ASEAN and Myanmar: the long shadow of crisis

The abiding negative impact of the financial crisis on the region's economies, societies, polities and international standing has been profound. The oligarchic structures underpinning ASEAN states were also severely disrupted, to varying degrees, forcing the adoption of new alliances and forms of legitimation. This section traces out the consequences of this for 'non-interference', focusing on the case of Myanmar. It argues that the actions of Myanmar's regime have repeatedly undermined ASEAN's cultivation of a dynamic, reformist image, forcing the Association to seek to deal more harshly with its recalcitrant member.

At the international level, the economic crisis left ASEAN permanently weakened. Foreign investment in ASEAN halved from 1997–2002, much of it relocating to China (UNCTAD 2009). This was disastrous for a region whose economic development, social stability and international political standing depended on an investment-driven, export-oriented growth strategy. The rise of China and India led regional elites to fear ASEAN's international economic and political marginalisation. Singapore's foreign minister warned that perceptions of ASEAN as an 'ineffective … sunset organisation … are political facts. Perceptions can define political reality – if we continue to be perceived as ineffective, we can be marginalised as our Dialogue Partners and international investors relegate us to the sidelines' (Jayakumar 2000). ASEAN has consequently launched myriad initiatives to regain its economic and political 'relevance', including the Hanoi Plan of Action, ASEAN+3 meetings with China, Japan and South Korea, the ASEAN Economic, Security, and Socio-Cultural Communities, annual East Asia Summits, and an ASEAN Charter.

ASEAN state managers' desire to project a reformist, progressive image of themselves is powerful reinforced by domestic social conflicts. Middle-class protest movements helped topple Suharto, severely dented UMNO's dominance, and forced the Philippine president from office in 2001. To recover their standing, ASEAN oligarchs have been forced into a range of new alliances and forms of legitimation. Thailand's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party forged a populist alliance between big business and the rural poor to displace the neoliberal Democrats to facilitate the capitalist elite's direct return to power (McCargo and Ukrist 2005; Pasuk and Baker 2004).

Elite strategies elsewhere have involved cultivating middle-class support by rhetorically embracing 'good governance' reforms and developing new forms of technocratic, and thus politically 'safe', participation. The success of such strategies varies considerably. Where opposition from below is very weak, this discourse is readily instrumentalised (Rodan and Jayasuriya 2007). However, elsewhere, as in Malaysia, middle-class rage at oligarchs' failure to deliver genuine reform has re-energised the *reformasi* movement (Case 2005; Surain Subramaniam 2001), resulting in UMNO's worst electoral showing for four decades in 2008. President Arroyo's government in the Philippines has also struggled to fend off charges of electoral fraud, corruption and human rights abuses (Abinales and Amoroso 2005: 277–94). Although most Indonesian political parties remain 'Trojan horses' for oligarchs (Tan 2006), reformist forces in Indonesia have also continued to struggle against the entrenched elite.



These domestic changes have not, contrary to some scholars' claims, automatically liberalised ASEAN states' foreign policies. Some reforms are little more than 'mock compliance' designed to assuage foreign powers and investors (Walter 2008). Selective liberalisation is also compatible with sectoral interests without liberal commitments and can even benefit highly predatory forces (Robison and Hadiz 2004; Salazar 2007). Civil society representatives have been repeatedly snubbed at ASEAN summits, despite leaders' rhetorical commitment to widening participation and a 'people-centred ASEAN'. Nonetheless, subordinated social groups have sometimes exploited small elite concessions to promote genuine political change, meaning the post-crisis dispensation remains contested (Rodan 2008). Where oligarchic rule is fragmented, as in Indonesia and the Philippines, legislative activism has added to the pressure on governments to adopt 'liberal' postures on select foreign-policy issues (Jones 2009; Rüland 2009). When these domestic struggles are combined with ASEAN's international crisis of 'relevance', ASEAN state managers have felt compelled to violate and even try to revise non-interference to defend their 'image' and 'reputation'. This is best illustrated through the case of Myanmar.

As noted above, the 'battlefields-to-marketplaces' drive of the early 1990s produced political and economic rapprochement between ASEAN states and Myanmar. However, responding to Western concerns about Myanmar's military regime, this was overlaid with 'constructive engagement', a genuine, if limited, effort to encourage the regime to engage in domestic reforms by exporting capital, offering policy advice, training junior Burmese officials, and admitting the country to ASEAN (Jones 2008: 273–5). Western powers heavily criticised ASEAN's policy and retaliated by boycotting ASEAN meetings in the wake of the financial crisis. Struggling to regain their international 'relevance', ASEAN thus staked its reputation on its ability to encourage Myanmar to liberalise. Significant successes from 2000–03 were, however, reversed by the ascendancy of

anti-reformist elements in the junta in 2003 and the reincarceration of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

ASEAN's reaction reflected the extent to which its standing with Western partners, especially the US, had become tied to the situation in Myanmar. Malaysia's prime minister demanded that Suu Kyi 'be released immediately', later suggesting that ASEAN might otherwise expel Myanmar. His foreign minister conceded it was 'an internal affair of Myanmar' but carried 'implications for the region'; the crisis needed to be resolved quickly and 'in a very credible manner to ensure ASEAN's reputation and image was not questioned'. The junta was, however, recalcitrant, and Western powers prepared new sanctions, threatened to boycott ASEAN meetings, curtail trade and investment relations, and even floated the idea of secondary sanctions on ASEAN states if Myanmar took its scheduled turn to chair ASEAN in 2006 (Jones 2008: 279–82). Domestically, liberal legislators formed the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus to push for a more forceful ASEAN policy, adding to the pressure on some member-states (Jones 2009). Myanmar was forced to relinquish its chairmanship.

ASEAN states have since repeatedly tried to insert themselves into Myanmar's domestic politics, demanding they be 'given a role to play' to boost ASEAN's 'credibility'. Various ASEAN foreign ministers have sought, unsuccessfully, to mediate between the regime and its opponents. In 2005, Thailand drafted a 'roadmap' for Myanmar's transition to democracy, convening a conference to 'support' the process through conditional foreign aid. The Philippines backed US efforts to add Myanmar to the UN Security Council's agenda in 2005, and ASEAN offered the regime no support. Jakarta has appointed several special envoys to Myanmar, and proposed that it accept ASEAN monitors similar to those deployed in Aceh in 2005. With Myanmar rejecting all these initiatives, Indonesia and Singapore have turned to India and China for help in pressurising the regime. ASEAN condemned the violent crackdown on protests led by Buddhist monks in late 2007, and worked to compel Myanmar to accept foreign aid in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in 2008 (Jones 2008: 282–7).

In addition to violating non-interference, core member states also attempted to formally dilute the principle by developing an ASEAN Charter which emphasised members' responsibilities to the grouping as a whole would and made provision for sanctioning mechanisms and a regional human rights body (Jones 2008: 283–4). These measures were, however, substantially diluted when Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar twice threatened to walk out of the entire process.[8] Consequently, commitments to liberal values sit awkwardly alongside the reaffirmation of non-interference and consensual decision-making in the final document.

ASEAN has thus reproduced the longstanding pattern whereby non-interference is formally retained but glaring exceptions to it continue. The explanation for this compromise lies not with 'norms' but with the conflicts within those member states opposed to change. For instance, Myanmar's society remains deeply divided, with fragile ceasefires between the

regime and rebel groups. The junta's absolutist conception of sovereignty reflects its belief that it is the only force capable of holding Myanmar together (Than 1998). Vietnam's very strained transition to capitalism has generated serious tensions between reformers, conservatives, and their respective patrimonial networks. Hanoi's emphasis on external sovereignty expresses these tensions as conservatives resist a supposed US-led conspiracy to undermine and destroy 'communism' (Thayer 1999). That the newer member states' are the historic targets of both ASEAN and superpower intervention merely reinforces their attachment to sovereignty. Because these imperatives will continue to clash with the dilemmas driving the core ASEAN states to innovate, contestation of the theory and practice of non-interference is likely to continue in a drawn-out and messy sequence of compromises for the foreseeable future.



## Conclusion

By focusing on social conflict as a generator of state forms and policies, and by closely examining actual state practice, a significant range of interventions by ASEAN states has been uncovered, from the containment of communism and social unrest to efforts to push Cambodia and Myanmar into internal political reforms. While 'non-interference' remains enshrined in ASEAN documents, the view that it is an 'unchanged melody', a cast-iron 'cherished principle' or a norm that has 'socialised' member states, is not sustainable. The meaning and application of the norm has, in fact, changed considerably over time, reflecting the changing pressures of social conflict, economic change, and the international political environment.

The historical sociology of ASEAN states helps explain both the emergence and persistence of the principle, and deviations from it, in a way that accounts assuming constant behaviour emanating from regime security concerns or powerful norms cannot. It was clearly in the interests of the anti-communist forces controlling ASEAN states both to insulate their restive societies from *and* intervene against external radical influences. Likewise, the increasingly conflicted and inconsistent persistence of the principle can be accounted for by the divergent interests of the dominant social forces and their opponents in ASEAN states. It is not, therefore, *pace* constructivists, that norms do not 'matter', but rather than norms themselves are not autonomous agents; they cannot tell us when, why and how they matter. For that, we must look not simply to interstate 'interaction', assuming that states are coherent entities with their own 'identities', but to conflict and contestation between the social forces that constitute states themselves.

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## Notes

1 Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand joined in 1967; Brunei Darussalam, in 1983; Laos and Myanmar, in 1997; and Cambodia, in 1999.
2 B. Kausikan, interview with the author, Singapore, February 2008.
3 B. Desker, interview with the author, Singapore, February 2008.
4 Kraisak Choonhavan, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 2008.
5 Ali Alatas, interview with the author, Jakarta, February 2008.
6 J. Asda, interview with the author, Bangkok, January 2008.
7 B. Kausikan, interview with the author, Singapore, February 2008.
8 ASEAN Secretariat Official, interview with the author, Jakarta, February 2008.

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