Why is ASEAN Diplomacy Changing?: From 'Non-Interference' to 'Open and Frank Discussions'

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WHY IS ASEAN DIPLOMACY
CHANGING?

"From “Non-Interference” to “Open and Frank Discussions”"

Hiro Katsumata

Abstract
A conventional/rationalist explanation holds that the ASEAN countries have begun to have open and frank discussions in order to deal with new challenges, such as economic and environmental issues, in an efficient way. Constructivists explain ASEAN’s change by focusing on the global normative shift, which emphasizes human rights and democracy.

Introduction
The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been changing in recent years. In their annual ministerial meetings and other settings, Southeast Asian countries are beginning to discuss issues of common concern in a relatively open and frank manner. Such candid discussions have the potential to contravene ASEAN’s traditional diplomatic norms. The ASEAN countries, in particular the five original members, for decades have been practicing a set of unique diplomatic norms—the “ASEAN Way”—whose elements include the principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. The ASEAN Way encourages the

1. ASEAN’s original members are Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines. Brunei joined in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Myanmar and Laos in 1997, and finally, in 1999, Cambodia became the 10th member.
Southeast Asian countries to seek an informal and incremental approach to cooperation through lengthy consultation and dialogue. The “comfort level” of members is an important precondition for ASEAN’s multilateral diplomacy, and members, for decades, have been pursuing dialogue without criticizing each other in public.

However, in recent years member states have distanced themselves from strict adherence to the ASEAN Way. The Thai proposal for “flexible engagement” in 1998 was one of the starting points of the recent change in ASEAN diplomacy. In July 1998, then-Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan proposed that ASEAN adopt a policy of flexible engagement, which involves discussions of fellow members’ domestic policies. He held that issues affecting each other might be brought up and discussed by ASEAN members, without this being perceived as interference. The Thai Foreign Ministry maintained that flexible engagement would not violate the principle of non-interference. However, it was significant that Bangkok called for a modified interpretation of what counts as interference in the domestic affairs of ASEAN members. The Thai proposal itself was not supported by other members, except for the Philippines. Nevertheless, debate over the interpretation of the principle of non-interference has continued.

Today, ASEAN has a framework called “Retreats,” in which matters of common concern are discussed frankly. The ministers held their first Retreat in July 1999 when they met for their regular annual meeting. They held another, separate from their regular annual meeting, in April 2001, and met again in July. The ministers had frank discussions on various issues such as regional security, intra- and inter-regional cooperation, and the future direction of ASEAN. In the ASEAN Ministerial Meetings (AMM) in 2002, the foreign ministers “reaffirmed the usefulness of informal, open and frank dialogue . . . to address issues of common concern to the region.” It is safe to say that the traditional diplomatic manner of ASEAN has been challenged, and ASEAN diplomacy has been changing. The principle of non-interference has been interpreted in a more flexible way.

Why has this happened? Why has ASEAN diplomacy been changing? This is the key question to be explored in this article. To answer it, two supplemental problems are involved. First, this research should address why

5. ASEAN, “Joint Communiqué, the 35th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting,” Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei, July 29–30, 2002.
it was in the late 1990s that ASEAN diplomacy began to change. Second, this study should also address the question of why some of the members have promoted a flexible interpretation of the non-interference principle, while others are rather reluctant to modify the ASEAN Way of diplomacy. Thailand and the Philippines have advocated changes in ASEAN’s traditional diplomatic style. Bangkok and Manila called for a policy of flexible engagement in the late 1990s. In contrast, among the original ASEAN members, Indonesia and Malaysia have been strong supporters of the traditional way. New ASEAN members in the 1990s such as Vietnam and Myanmar are also reluctant to change the interpretation of the ASEAN Way. Any explanation for ASEAN’s change should address the question of the difference within ASEAN.

In order to address these questions, this article considers the plausibility of a conventional explanation that is supported by many authors. Such an explanation is in line with a rationalist perspective in international relations (IR). It holds that the recent change is ASEAN’s attempt to deal efficiently with various new challenges, including environmental problems, economic disruption, terrorism, drugs, and transnational crimes. These issues require a collective response; thus the open and frank discussions occur.

This study reveals some limitations of this line of argument, while not completely rejecting its validity. The study attempts to offer an alternative account by taking a constructivist perspective. Today, the main debate in IR is between constructivists and rationalists, and in this article, the former are shown attempting to challenge the latter in the case of ASEAN diplomacy. Constructivism is broad in an epistemological sense, and contains many strands. The strand of constructivism employed in this study is the one that takes a similar epistemological stance to those in rationalist IR approaches, including neoliberalism and neorealism. This is because this kind of constructivism, like the rationalist approaches, seeks to explain events in the real world, and the aim of this study is to offer a sound explanation for the recent change in ASEAN’s diplomacy.

The first and second sections of this article deal with the conventional/rationalist and constructivist explanations, respectively. These sections ex-

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7. This kind of constructivism is supported by such authors as Peter Katzenstein and Alexander Wendt. See Peter Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), and Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
explore how each perspective addresses the research questions above. The concluding section summarizes the argument and explores the possibilities of an eclectic view.

**Conventional/Rationalist Explanation**

In today’s international relations, rationalist approaches hold a dominant position. Among various strands of rationalism, the most common one in IR assumes that actors pursue their own interests instrumentally and rationally. In such a perspective, international relations are seen as efficient and as following a course which leads inexorably and relatively quickly to a unique equilibrium.\(^8\) Actors’ actions are seen as driven by a logic of consequences, as opposed to a logic of appropriateness.\(^9\) This rationalist perspective may be useful for explaining ASEAN diplomacy. What can be regarded as a conventional explanation for ASEAN’s recent change is in line with this perspective.

The conventional/rationalist explanation holds that the recent change in ASEAN’s diplomacy is the member countries’ attempt to deal efficiently with new challenges. These include environmental issues, the pollution haze problem, economic disruption, illegal migration, terrorism, drugs, and transnational crime. While traditional issues such as national security (defined mainly in militaristic terms) may be addressed individually by each member, these non-traditional issues require a multilateral response achieved through policy coordination. An inadequate response by one member can cause damage to neighboring countries or to the whole Southeast Asian region. This is why frank discussions among the ASEAN members have become necessary. Members have begun to have open and frank discussions in order to deal with these new challenges efficiently.

**Why the Late 1990s?**

The conventional/rationalist explanation can address the question of why ASEAN began to change in recent years—i.e., in the late 1990s—when member countries faced two major non-traditional challenges. One was the financial crisis that erupted in 1997, which caused damage to most Southeast Asian countries. The other challenge is the environmental problem caused by the Indonesian pollution haze in 1997, which affected Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, and the southern part of the Philippines. The burning of forests by

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\(^9\) While the latter perspective sees actions as rule-oriented, in the former perspective, actions are driven by calculation of their consequences as measured against prior preferences or interests, which are seen as exogenous and stable. Ibid., pp. 949–51; and James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1989).
Indonesian industries to create plantations severely damaged the well-being of people in neighboring countries.

For proponents of this explanation, it is understandable why the ASEAN countries began in the late 1990s to move toward promoting frank discussion and modifying the interpretation of the non-interference principle. Efficient responses to these challenges required collective endeavors, which often involved discussions of each country’s domestic issues. Simon Tay and Jesus Estanislao argue that in ASEAN, “The strict adherence to the principle of non-interference . . . has been softened and dented,” and that “in a number of areas, there has been some evolution . . . toward reforms.” Their focus is on the recent economic and environmental crises:

In response to the economic crisis . . . the ASEAN countries began a process to exchange financial information and review as well as comment on such information . . . with increasing levels of frankness. . . . There have also been changes to the ASEAN Way of doing things in response to the environmental crisis caused by the Indonesian fires and haze . . . [The meetings of senior environmental officials] have become the occasion for a more open and frank discussion.10

Herman Kraft emphasizes the transboundary implications of the environmental and economic issues in his discussion of the Thai proposal for flexibility. The haze issue could not be considered as a purely internal matter for Indonesia, considering its transboundary effects. For Kraft, similarly with the haze case, the financial crisis “showed the importance of reconsidering non-intervention on issues that have transboundary implications.”11

Furthermore, it is notable that many scholars advocate modifying the interpretation of the principle of non-interference, while stressing the need for ASEAN to deal with its new challenges. Tay and Estanislao argue that exceptions must be found with regard to the principles of the ASEAN Way.12 Jusuf Wanandi notes that the principle of non-intervention is now “passé”:

Many of the old principles on which ASEAN has functioned for the last thirty years are no longer adequate . . . For example, the informal style of cooperation . . . has proved inadequate. . . . Domestic problems such as the financial crisis, drug-trafficking, environmental hazards, migration problems, transnational crimes . . . are regional problems. They call for regional . . . cooperation and solutions.13

Why Are Some Countries Active/Reluctant?

For the proponents of the conventional/rationalist explanation, it is not surprising that Thailand has advocated changes in ASEAN’s diplomacy. Bangkok was one of the countries that suffered badly as a result of the financial crisis. Thus, Bangkok felt the need for ASEAN members to discuss frankly each other’s domestic matters, including economic policies. In addition, Thailand faces the problem of illegal immigrants from Myanmar. When Bangkok put forward its proposal for flexible engagement, it was said that Thailand had been pushing an agenda of greater openness partly because it had to deal with this problem. Moreover, Thailand shares a border with Cambodia, which is one of the most unstable countries in Southeast Asia. Thailand’s security can easily be affected by domestic problems in Cambodia. Therefore, frank discussions of each country’s domestic issues within ASEAN are valuable for Bangkok. To be sure, many other ASEAN members are facing similar problems. However, since Thailand shares land borders with four countries, it is understandable that the government is particularly concerned about the domestic situations of its neighbors.

While Thailand has advocated changes, many other ASEAN members have been rather reluctant to modify the interpretation of the non-interference principle and the ASEAN Way. Among the original ASEAN members, Indonesia and Malaysia are strong supporters of the strict application of the ASEAN Way. A cursory investigation of the situation in the late 1990s would lead one to wonder why these countries are strong supporters, since they were the ones most severely affected by the economic disruption in Bangkok in the late 1990s. One could have expected that they would be the first to call for frank discussions of other countries’ domestic matters. Countries that were severely affected could have promoted changes more strongly than Thailand, which had brought about the region-wide economic problem.

In addition, with regard to the haze issue, one could have expected that Malaysia, which suffered as a result of the domestic Indonesian problem, would be the strongest advocate for a flexible interpretation of the non-interference principle. However, in reality, it was Bangkok, instead of Kuala Lumpur, which proposed a policy of flexible engagement. Therefore, one may point out that the conventional/rationalist explanation cannot account for the fact that Indonesia and Malaysia have been reluctant to modify the ASEAN Way of diplomacy, although it can address Thailand’s behaviors.

Proponents of this explanation would not agree with such a claim, maintaining that they can explain some countries’ reluctance to promote frank discussions by referring to domestic concerns. If a country has domestic is-
sues the government does not want to expose to international criticism, it becomes reluctant to promote frank discussions and collective endeavors. Other countries’ interference might restrict domestic policy options to deal with such issues, including questions of nation building, human rights, and democracy.

It is noteworthy that one of the background conditions for the development of ASEAN’s principle of non-interference was the Southeast Asian countries’ concern over domestic issues.\(^\text{15}\) Owing to their concern over domestic security, their policy priority was to maintain domestic stability. This was especially so during the early years of ASEAN, the 1960s and 1970s. Its members’ main security concerns were internal, because the countries were weak in terms of sociopolitical cohesiveness.\(^\text{16}\) They obtained independence only in the mid-20th century, and were at an early stage of consolidation into nation states. Domestic uprisings were endemic, and the governments’ priority was to engage in nation building.\(^\text{17}\) Against this background, the ASEAN countries prized the non-interference principle. They held this principle in the context of nation building.\(^\text{18}\) Policies aimed at nation building could contravene liberal values such as human rights and democracy. The non-interference principle enabled countries to concentrate on domestic matters, avoiding interference or criticism from other states that would have been an obstacle to nation building.

Thus, the claim that a country with domestic difficulties tends to be reluctant to modify the interpretation of the non-interference principle is understandable. In contrast, a country with relatively few domestic concerns should not hesitate to promote a flexible interpretation. Thailand and the Philippines, both of which have advocated a flexible interpretation, nowadays have relatively few domestic problems associated with human rights and democracy. This is shown in *Freedom in the World*, an annual comparative assessment of political rights (PR)—which enable people to participate freely in the political process—and civil liberties (CL)—which include the freedom


\(^{16}\) Barry Buzan’s distinction of “strong states” and “weak states” is useful in understanding the security concerns of ASEAN members. The principal distinguishing feature of weak states is their high level of concern over domestically generated threats to the security of the government. Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, second edition (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1991), pp. 97–102.


to develop views, institutions, and personal autonomy apart from the state. According to the assessment in 1998, the year in which the flexible engagement proposal was put forward, Thailand was graded 2 (PR) and 3 (CL) and the Philippines was also 2 (PR) and 3 (CL), out of 7, the lowest possible score. In contrast, the Southeast Asian countries that have not been eager to modify the interpretation of the ASEAN Way, including Malaysia and Indonesia, have more problems. In 1998, Malaysia’s grades were 5 (PR) and 5 (CL); and Indonesia’s ones were 6 (PR) and 4 (CL). Moreover, the new ASEAN members in the 1990s have been strong supporters of strict adherence to the ASEAN Way, and they are also burdened with many domestic issues associated with human rights and democracy. For example, Vietnam’s grades were 7 (PR) and 6 (CL); and Myanmar’s ones were 7 (PR) and 7 (CL).

For the proponents of the conventional/rationalist explanation, this explains why Thailand and the Philippines have not been hesitant to modify the ASEAN Way, while other countries have been reluctant to change the style of ASEAN diplomacy. The differences among the ASEAN countries can be explained by focusing on their domestic concerns. Jürgen Haacke argues that the ASEAN countries, particularly those considered authoritarian, are concerned about the security of their regime; therefore, they are opposed to a flexible interpretation of the ASEAN Way.

**Limitations**

As discussed above, the conventional/rationalist approach can help explain why the ASEAN countries began to change their diplomatic style in the late 1990s, and why some have promoted change while others have been reluctant to. Yet, we should point out some of the limitations of this explanation. The behaviors of the actors in Southeast Asia transcend the realm of practical policies based on instrumental rationality, and thus cannot be seen as mere attempts to deal efficiently with new challenges like environmental and economic issues. The actors have been discussing frankly issues that do not require efficient international responses and collective endeavors. Some of them have even begun to criticize other ASEAN members’ domestic policies. These behaviors are related to issues concerning liberal values, such as human rights and democracy.

For example, in 1998, when Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was sacked by then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and subse-

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HIRO KATSUMATA 245

quenty jailed, the Philippines and Indonesia openly criticized the government in Kuala Lumpur. Criticism by then-Philippine President Joseph Estrada may have been the first occasion that the head of an ASEAN state complained directly about human rights violations in a member state. Moreover, then-Thai Foreign Minister Surin stated that although the Anwar issue was Malaysia’s internal problem, it could have far-reaching implications for ASEAN members. Surin went so far as to argue that this issue was hindering the unity of ASEAN. Another example is the criticism by Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew of then-Indonesian President Suharto’s choice in 1998 of Jusuf Habibie for vice president. This was the first direct criticism of the Indonesian president by the leader of another ASEAN country. Similarly, in February 1999, Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong called on Jakarta to hold elections that would be accepted as fair and legitimate by the Indonesian people.

It seems that the conventional/rationalist explanation cannot account for this liberal aspect of ASEAN diplomacy. Therefore, the next section takes an alternative, constructivist perspective, in order to consider actors’ interests as defined by ideational factors such as norms and values. Some proponents of the rationalist explanation may be moved to launch a counter-argument that their perspective also addresses human rights and democracy. They may argue that because the ASEAN countries are worried about their international reputations and image, they have begun to discuss human rights and democracy and to criticize member countries’ domestic policies.

For example, Kraft mentions the “internationalization” of human rights norms in the post-Cold War era as one of the reasons behind the Thai proposal to review the non-interference principle. In addition to the transboundary implications of the environmental and economic issues, Kraft focuses on the internationalization of the norms. The non-interference principle, under which the Southeast Asian countries did not criticize other members’ human rights records, had attracted the criticism of Western countries. ASEAN’s adherence to non-interference had detrimentally affected the association’s standing in the international arena. Similarly, Haacke argues that the Thai proposal for flexible engagement should not be regarded as a mere product of instrumental calculations. The proposal also illustrated Bangkok’s earnest

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struggle for international recognition of its democratic credentials. Haacke adds that ASEAN’s diplomatic principles have been relaxed because of the members’ concerns about ASEAN’s image and reputation, while noting a global process of norm diffusion in areas such as human rights.

These authors’ arguments are suggestive, even in the eyes of constructivists. However, constructivists are not satisfied with the arguments. This is because they fail to address the question of why the ASEAN countries are concerned with their credentials, standings, or reputations in the international arena, with regard to the issues of human rights and democracy. For constructivists, this kind of question can only be addressed from their own perspective, which focuses on ideational factors shared by actors. The ASEAN countries’ behaviors and concerns can only be understood by referring to the liberal norms shared by actors in Southeast Asia. As will be argued in the next section, these actors thought that violation of such norms would damage ASEAN’s reputation—only because the actors shared, and thus were influenced by, the norms.

**Constructivist Explanation**

Constructivists focus on the role of ideational factors. Constructivism considers that actors’ interests can be defined and redefined by ideational factors, including norms, while rationalist IR approaches treat actors’ interests as exogenously given and fixed. For constructivists, regional diplomacy in Southeast Asia has been influenced by a normative shift at the global level that concerns the relationship between the principle of non-interference and the norms of human rights and democracy. In today’s global arena, the dividing line between domestic and international issues is gradually blurring, and many domestic issues are beginning to have external dimensions. Such issues concern the norms of human rights and democracy. In this situation,

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strict application of the principle of non-interference is beginning to seem irrelevant. The principle is now being interpreted in a more flexible way. That is to say, the importance of the principle of non-interference is decreasing, while that of the norms of human rights and democracy is on the increase.

This global normative shift is demonstrated in aspects of international affairs in the post-Cold War era. The United Nations has been carrying out operations in various parts of the world under the rubric of humanitarian intervention. The participants of the Organization/Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE/CSCE) have modified their interpretation of the non-interference principle. In 1992, the participating states agreed that issues related to human rights cannot be considered as internal affairs of states, and are not subject to the principle of non-intervention.\(^\text{30}\) On the basis of the notion that in a democracy, sovereignty is vested not in the state, but in the people, the European countries have considered collective intervention legitimate.\(^\text{31}\)

ASEAN diplomacy, including its recent change, has been affected by this normative shift at the global level. Strict adherence to the non-interference principle, which let the Southeast Asian countries ignore the domestic affairs of other members, has been questioned. Thailand and the Philippines, inspired by this shift, have suggested a modified interpretation of the non-interference principle. To support these claims, constructivists focus on Bangkok and Manila. The foreign-policy makers of the former regime in Bangkok, which proposed flexible engagement in 1998, strongly supported liberal values associated with individuals’ rights and freedom. These policy makers included then-Foreign Minister Surin and then-Deputy Foreign Minister Sukhumbhand Paribatra. These actors had been greatly inspired by the global normative shift, and thus promoted frank discussion of each ASEAN member’s domestic affairs. Surin, when preparing his proposal for a policy of flexible engagement, maintained that such a policy “was needed for Thailand, whose government [respected] an open society, democracy and human rights.”\(^\text{32}\) During an interview with a journalist in 1999, Surin said, “My value of freedom of expression [and] freedom of action is absolute.”\(^\text{33}\)

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another occasion, Surin said, “The Thai people should be proud that their country implements the policy [of frankness and open engagement within ASEAN], as it clearly reflects a love for democracy, human rights and transparency.”

It can be said that Thailand is a country that generally values human rights and democracy. When the foreign minister’s proposal for flexible engagement was announced, the Thai people recognized its significance in terms of liberal values. The country’s leading scholars and business community welcomed their government’s policy as a sign of maturity in conducting a foreign policy seeking to promote human rights and democracy. The policy makers of the current regime in Bangkok are relatively modest in terms of the promotion of liberal values, compared with those of the former regime. Yet, the agendas put forward by the former regime still have an impact on Thai policies and on ASEAN’s diplomacy.

It is also notable that Thailand has been the leading proponent of the notion of a “People’s ASEAN.” Since the 1990s, Bangkok has been calling for an ASEAN people’s forum where issues could be debated and popular sentiment could be considered. This is why, in ASEAN Ministerial Meetings in 1998, Surin stated that ASEAN needed to be “more people-centered” and responsive to the “aspirations of its peoples.” Surin’s view was that the people in Southeast Asia deserved an “honest and sincere analysis of their problems.” Today, in the ministerial meetings, the ASEAN countries have begun to employ this notion in the context of human rights and civil society. The ASEAN ministers have recognized that non-governmental actors should


37. The Thai Foreign Minister, Surakiart Sathirathai, noted in February 2001 that the new government’s foreign policy toward Myanmar would be governed by the “Asian way” of non-interference. A Thai newspaper, The Nation, observed that this was Surakiart’s attempt to dilute the flexible-engagement policy implemented by the last government. “‘Asian Way’ the New Way, Says Surakiart,” The Nation, Bangkok, February 28, 2001.


HIRO KATSUMATA 249

be involved in the discussion of human rights in the “broader context of a People’s ASEAN.”

The Philippines’ support for a flexible interpretation of the non-interference principle is understandable too. This is because the Manila government views its republic as a “Western democratic” country respecting human rights. Manila has always been concerned about ASEAN’s international image. Thus, it supported the Thai proposal because ASEAN’s failure to address human rights issues would have damaged the association’s international reputation. In addition to the policy makers of these two countries, many actors in Southeast Asia have been influenced by the global normative shift. The degree of influence may vary, but many actors have been attentive to the global discourse on human rights and democracy. This is why there have been many cases in which the domestic policies of an ASEAN member were criticized by other members in this context.

Why in the Late 1990s?

The constructivist explanation presented above can address the question of why ASEAN began to change in the late 1990s. ASEAN has faced criticism from the countries of North America and Europe for admitting Myanmar, ruled by a military regime, in 1997 as a member. For the ASEAN countries that supported liberal values associated with human rights and democracy—notably, Thailand and the Philippines, this situation was undesirable. Actors there thought that the Myanmar issue could damage ASEAN’s international image, reputation, and legitimacy. This is one of the important reasons why it was in the late 1990s that these two countries called for frank discussions of domestic issues. As then-Thai Deputy Foreign Minister Sukhumbhand stated, “It is essential that members do their utmost to make themselves acceptable in the eyes of the international community.”

In addition, for constructivists, the impact of the Asian financial crisis should not be ignored. The crisis was a shock external to the ASEAN countries’ practice of their diplomatic norms, including non-interference. For constructivists, such an external shock may have a massive impact on

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41. ASEAN, “Joint Communiqué, the 34th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting,” Hanoi, July 23–24, 2001.
42. Author’s interview with an anonymous official of the Philippine Foreign Ministry, May 2002.
43. Ibid.
44. Finnemore and Sikkink argue that a combination of the actors’ desires to enhance their international legitimation and self-esteem and pressure for conformity drive many of them to adopt norms. See Finnemore and Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics,” pp. 895, 902–04.
45. For Bangkok’s concern about its democratic credentials, see Haacke, “The Concept of Flexible Engagement,” pp. 587–89.
norms, and the crisis had a great impact on the Southeast Asian countries’ practice of the ASEAN Way. As a result of this shock, they began to think that the principle of non-interference could be interpreted in a more flexible way, given that this principle was valueless in the face of the financial crisis.

**Why Are Some Countries Active/Reluctant?**

The constructivist explanation can also address the question of why Thailand and the Philippines have advocated a flexible interpretation of the non-interference principle, while other ASEAN members have been reluctant to modify the ASEAN Way. A constructivist answer to this issue has been suggested already. The policy makers of those two countries support liberal values associated with human rights and democracy. They have been strongly inspired by the global normative shift.

Among ASEAN members, Thailand and the Philippines have been relatively distinct, if not politically Western. Since the Cold War era, they have maintained strong defense ties with the U.S., although ASEAN as a whole declared its neutralist stance in 1971 by introducing its plan for the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality. In this respect, the fact that Bangkok and Manila were more influenced by the global normative shift than the rest of the ASEAN members is not surprising. One of the cases that demonstrate these countries’ adherence to liberal values is their response to the East Timor issue. In the global debate over the international response to the East Timor crisis in 1999, Thailand and the Philippines were the ASEAN nations most sympathetic to some form of humanitarian intervention.

In contrast, other ASEAN members are relatively passive on the issue of liberal values, and less influenced by the global normative shift. Thus, they are rather reluctant to promote a flexible interpretation of ASEAN norms and frank discussions of domestic issues. Since their policy makers are not strong supporters of liberal values, they do not hesitate to express their disagreement with a plan to promote a flexible interpretation of the non-interference principle. They say that discussions of the issues of human rights and democracy are undesirable and premature. When Bangkok put forward its proposal, then-Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas expressed his disagreement:


“The principle of non-interference is a very basic principle... [W]e can talk about certain problems like transnational crimes, but if you start talking about how a country must run affairs like... democratizing, or... human rights, then you are getting into trouble.”

Former Malaysian Foreign Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi maintained that an attempt to abandon the “time-honoured principle” of non-interference would set ASEAN on the “path towards eventual disintegration.”

Conclusions

In an attempt to address the question of why ASEAN diplomacy has been changing, this study has considered the merits of two different explanations. The conventional/rationalist explanation holds that the recent change is ASEAN’s attempt to deal with new challenges in an efficient manner. The new challenges, such as environmental, economic, and societal issues, require an efficient multilateral response, and thus, the ASEAN countries have been discussing them in an open and frank manner. This line of explanation can address the question of why it was in the late 1990s that ASEAN diplomacy began to change. The Southeast Asian countries faced two major challenges in the late 1990s: the Asian financial crisis and the haze problem. Efficient responses to these challenges would require collective endeavors, which may involve discussions of each country’s domestic issues.

This explanation can also address the question of why some countries have advocated changes in ASEAN’s diplomacy, while others are reluctant to modify the interpretation of the ASEAN Way. Thailand is one of the countries that was severely affected by the financial crisis. It shares land borders with Myanmar and Cambodia, both of which are relatively unstable politically. Therefore, Thailand called for frank discussion of domestic issues. In addition, this explanation holds that countries with domestic problems that the government does not want to expose to international criticism tend to be reluctant to promote frank discussions, while countries with relatively few domestic concerns do not hesitate to promote a flexible interpretation of the non-interference principle. Indonesia is an example of the former category, and Thailand of the latter.

However, this conventional/rationalist explanation has some limitations. The behaviors of the ASEAN countries transcend the realm of practical policies. They have been engaged in frank discussions of issues that do not re-

quire efficient international responses, such as those associated with human rights and democracy.

Given that the rationalist explanation cannot grasp this aspect of ASEAN diplomacy, this article has offered an alternative. The constructivist explanation holds that ASEAN’s diplomacy has been affected by the global normative shift. In today’s global arena, the importance of the principle of non-interference is decreasing, while that of the norms of human rights and democracy is on the increase. Inspired by this normative shift, actors in Thailand and the Philippines have suggested a modified interpretation of the non-interference principle. The policy makers of these two countries support liberal values associated with human rights and democracy, and have been greatly inspired by the global normative shift. In contrast, many other ASEAN countries are passive with regard to the promotion of liberal values, and are reluctant to modify the ASEAN Way of diplomacy. Hence, the constructivist explanation can address the question of why Bangkok and Manila have called for changes, while other countries have not.

Furthermore, this explanation can also address the issues of why it was in the late 1990s that ASEAN diplomacy began to change. For the ASEAN countries that support liberal values, the association’s admission of Myanmar could have damaged the international image and reputation of ASEAN. This explains why Bangkok and Manila called for frank discussions of domestic issues. In addition, the Asian financial crisis served as an external shock, and had a great impact on the Southeast Asian countries’ practice of the ASEAN Way.

Eclectic View?
The discussion in this article, summarized above, suggests that the constructivist explanation is sounder than the conventional/rationalist explanation. However, it may be that the question of which line of explanation is superior is not as important as one might assume. IR theorists tend to focus on the strengths and weaknesses of various IR perspectives. Disagreement between rationalists and constructivists constitutes the core of scholarly debate in today’s IR. However, Peter Katzenstein and Nobuo Okawara argue that researchers should be disabused of the notion that scholarship is about paradigmatic clashes, rather than disciplined analysis of empirical puzzles. Hence, for these authors, an approach-driven analysis should give place to problem-driven research.

53. Ibid., p. 183.
The two explanations offered in this paper can grasp two different aspects of ASEAN diplomacy. It seems that both of these two aspects are relevant. Attempts to judge the superiority of one explanation and to rule out the value of the other may lead one to ignore an important aspect of ASEAN politics. Therefore, it may be worthwhile to explore the possibilities of an eclectic view. For a full understanding of the change in ASEAN diplomacy, it may be worthwhile to take some elements of both the conventional/rationalist and constructivist views into account.54

There are a number of cases in which the elements of the two different accounts offered in this paper do not contradict each other. When they are not contradictory, researchers may explore the possibilities of an eclectic view for a complete understanding of the case. For the question of why it was in the late 1990s that ASEAN diplomacy began to change, both the conventional/rationalist and constructivist explanations consider the impact of the financial crisis. These two explanations differ about the impact the economic crisis had on international politics; however, they do not contradict each other. The former holds that the crisis made the countries in the region aware that this kind of new challenge would require collective efforts that might involve discussions of domestic issues. The latter holds that the crisis was a shock that made the ASEAN countries think the non-interference principle might be inappropriate.

Moreover, an eclectic account may be useful in exploring the question of why Thailand and the Philippines called for a flexible interpretation of the non-interference principle. For proponents of the conventional/rationalist explanation, Bangkok and Manila felt the need for ASEAN to be able to deal with a variety of new challenges, such as environmental problems, financial crises, and illegal migration, which would require collective, efficient responses. For constructivists, these countries were inspired by the global normative shift, and thus believe that the issues of human rights and democracy should be addressed in ASEAN. These different interpretations need not be considered contradictory, and a country can take account of both at the same time.

Some proponents of the conventional/rationalist explanation add that the motive behind Bangkok’s proposal included its concern about ASEAN’s international reputation with regard to the issues of human rights and democracy. Yet, these scholars do not offer a satisfactory account of the sources of Bangkok’s concern. This is where constructivists, focusing on ideational factors, may assist rationalists. When rationalism fails to offer a full account, constructivism can complement it by identifying the sources of actors’ inter-

54. In this regard, Katzenstein and Okawara argue that analytical eclecticism is well-suited to capturing the truth of Asia-Pacific affairs. Ibid., passim, especially p. 178 (citation 91).
For constructivists, Bangkok’s concern can be explained in terms of liberal values and norms. An eclectic view can even accommodate this kind of complementary relationship between two approaches.

As described above, many elements of the conventional/rationalist explanation and those of the constructivist account do not contradict each other. For a complete understanding of the situation, an eclectic view may be useful. In today’s ASEAN diplomacy, it can be said that elements of both the rationalist and constructivist interpretations are intertwined.