BUILDING
PEACE AND PROSPERITY
THE ROLE OF ELITE NETWORKS
IN ASEAN AND BEYOND

Policy Report
July 2020

Dr Mikael Weissmann

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Executive Summary

This report explores how elite networks among ASEAN countries can contribute to peace and prosperity in the region. Indeed, the building of cross-border elite networks is particularly relevant today given the heightened tension in the region and beyond caused by the ongoing power shift from the West to the East, and from the United States and Japan to China. In fact, with today's new challenges such as the Sino-US trade war and the ongoing pandemic, it is particularly important to ensure both formal and informal elite interactions among ASEAN members and with the broader Asia-Pacific region, as they can often work as "normal" even during uncertain times.

1. Introduction[1]

This report explores how elite networks developed through different forms of interactions and networks among the regional elites can contribute to peace and prosperity in the region. It also considers how elite networks may contribute to conflict management and peacebuilding across the ASEAN and beyond. The report first defines and outlines four types of elite networks, and analyses their impact. Finally, conclusions are drawn, and some recommendations are made.

Elite networks are networks of individuals without formal structures, linked together by one or more social relationships. They are, by definition, interpersonal and informal. The networks are often institutionalised through deeply embedded patterns of social practices and norms, although no formal (written) structure exists. The networks can be found in, and across, different spheres including politics, military, scholarly, and economic spheres. Elite networks are central for and developed through different interactions such as track 2, track 1.5, and other high-level meetings. They play a central part in economic and government level exchanges. They are important for the success of functional cooperation, where the level of success is more if there is good interpersonal chemistry and understanding of each other's views, needs, and underlying interests. The networks exist within formal institutions. In the case of ASEAN, informal cooperation and interaction are central. The same is the case for institutions such as the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN ISIS, and the like. Formal institutions offer an opportunity to create and deepen networks, create trust, and build long-term relationships between individuals from different participating states.[2]

2   Here, it is important to note the distinction between the sometimes formalised structure in which these networks are developed, and the actual networks themselves. For example, ASEAN meetings have a formalised structure that works well for network development, but all participants at such meetings are not necessarily included in an interpersonal network. In a strict sense, interpersonal networks are by definition voluntary.

Tracing the Impact on Peace and Prosperity

Many of the respondents interviewed by the author for this report have emphasised the importance of developing extensive webs of inter-personal linkages and networks in the political and military spheres.[3] Most interviewees called personal relations among regional leaders and the elite "extremely important", acknowledging that the development of personal relationships was crucial for mutual trust and understanding. Personal contacts have been referred to with labels such as being "irreplaceable resources" and a "sort of social capital."

Across ASEAN, personal relations between regional leaders form the basis for mutual trust and understanding. When talking to respondents/interlocutors in the region, the language used to describe the importance of such relations among regional leaders ranged from extremely important to being key to friendly interstate relations, and a reflection of the relationship between their countries. Interestingly, the importance of personal relations was most strongly emphasised within the region than outside.

The networks considered to be the most central for peace and prosperity are the large number of elite networks developed through track 2 activities and regular meetings between key policy and decision-makers. These have often developed within the framework of regional, subregional, and international organisations and forums, and through the emerging think-tank community over the last 25 years or so. The key here is people-to-people socialising and interactions on the sidelines of the formal framework or negotiations, sometimes referred to as informal communication, informal channels, or off-the-record discussions. Interactions within the academic and business sector are also significant, since the openness to developing a network is larger in these sectors, given their less sensitive focus.

The level of impact of elite networks is highly dependent on their members' influence at the national level, as foreign policy is foremost a state affair. While networks between members of policymaking bodies and political leaders are, of course, important, their significance is limited by the fact that the depth of cross-border interpersonal networks between such individuals is constrained

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3   The examples draws on 100 plus interviews conducted in East Asia (Singapore, Hong Kong, Mainland China and Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan) and Europe during the last 15 years. Also see Weissmann, M. "The South China Sea: Still no War on the Horizon." *Asian Survey* 55 (2015): 596–617. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2015.55.3.596; Weissmann, M. "Why is there a relative peace in the South China Sea?." In *Entering Uncharterd Waters? ASEAN and The South China Sea Dispute*, edited by Pavin Chachavalpongpun. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014; Weissmann, M. *The East Asian Peace: Conflict Prevention and Informal Peacebuilding*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

by the overarching status of relations between states. Non-policymaking elites are freer to develop networks and interact, and may at the same time influence members of the policymaking circles in their home countries. For example, numerous members of the intellectual and business elites have close links to decision-makers and play crucial roles in policymaking and policy advice through informal channels. One such example is what is referred to as "establishment intellectuals" in China, but similar interaction between intellectuals and business elites on the one hand and political elites on the other also occurs in ASEAN.

Moreover, there are often close links between think-tanks and the political leadership, most obviously so in the case of government-linked think-tanks, where it is not uncommon for elite members to work as policy advisers or have good personal connections with individuals in policymaking circles.[4] It is also noteworthy that many senior policymakers step down to work in different think-tanks. For example, the former Secretary-General of ASEAN, Rodolfo Severino Jr. was the inaugural head of the ASEAN Studies Centre (ASC) at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore from 2008–2015. The current director of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, since March 2020, and also the Head of the ASEAN Studies Centre, Mr Choi Shing Kwok previously worked as Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, and has a background in the Singapore Armed Forces and the Singapore's Ministry of Defence.

Of course, it is difficult to trace and assess the direct impact of elite networks on peace and prosperity. They should be understood as catalysts for other processes and mechanisms. At minimum, they are networking mechanisms that promote trust and confidence between influential groups in different countries. Interaction may also generate increased understanding, which in turn is essential for peace and prosperity. Enhanced understanding and some form of trust — even if limited — facilitate continuous and positive interactions and a willingness to listen to other members of the network. This, in turn, enhances the possibility and ability to find common ground. Understanding and trust also decrease the risk of misunderstandings and miscalculations. It should be noted here that such positive dynamics are relatively strong in networks, since being a member of a network is by definition voluntary and implies an openness to mutual engagement and learning. Which is why these networks also have a role in influencing agenda setting.

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[4] See eg. Zimmerman, Erin, and Diane Stone. "ASEAN think tanks, policy change and economic cooperation: from the Asian financial crisis to the global financial crisis." *Policy and Society* 37 (2018): 260–75. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/14494035.2017.1397394; Job, Brian L. "Track 2 Diplomacy: Ideational Contribution to the Evolving Asian Security Order." In *Assessing Track 2 Diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific Region: A CSCAP Reader*, edited by Desmond Ball, and Kwa Chong Guan. Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), 2010.

Elite Networks in Practice

The importance of personal relations and networks in the ASEAN region can hardly be overstated. It plays a crucial role at key track 1.5 and 2 events like the Shangri-La Dialogue, CSCAP, and others. While general discussions in the open forum tend to be rather formal, there is space for informal, off-the-record meetings during coffee breaks, for example. To cite one experienced CSCAP participant, it was "All business on the sidelines. [It is] very Asian, very consensual. No debate [at the main table and] all positions decided beforehand. [There are] some open discussions, but most of it at the sidelines, at the coffee table, etc."

Such unofficial discussions are essential for network building. They also work as trust and confidence-building mechanisms, and allow the participants to test their ideas without committing to them officially. This not only encourages new thinking, but also allows for improved information and understanding of the underlying logics and interests behind official positions, statements, and actions. Through these exchanges, confidence and trust are being built. Occasionally, deep trust is developed; not least as the participants share many experiences and characteristics, and frequently are each other's counterparts. Eventhough this trust differs from friendship, it becomes a logical result of repeated interaction. Repeated interactions also discourage cheating, as there are mutual gains from upholding a certain level of sincerity. At a minimal level, your ability to assess the other's level of sincerity will have increased, as through interactions you learn whom to, and whom not to, trust. This way, informal discussions also decrease the likelihood of confrontations because of misunderstandings or miscalculations.

Another case can be found in the rich and versatile think-tank network that has developed over the last 25 years. These think-tanks are often linked to different states and consists of or are linked to elite policy experts. They also have closer relationships with governments than is the case in the West.[5] Zimmerman and Stone have found that through analysis and networking, these think-tanks are especially influential through constructing the narrative pathways and agendas for different organisations. Through their close governmental relationships and the "special position" they hold "in the policy process" they also "come to the fore and influence the public discourse and thus public policy, by framing the arguments of policymakers and politicians" at "critical junctures."[6]

5   Zimmerman, Erin, and Diane Stone. "ASEAN think tanks, policy change and economic cooperation: from the Asian financial crisis to the global financial crisis." *Policy and Society* 37 (2018): 260–75. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/14494035.2017.1397394

6   Ladi, Stella. "Think tanks, discursive institutionalism and policy change." In *Social Science and*

Elite networks are also an integrated and important part of the regionalisation process among ASEAN members. A large number of meetings and exchanges has created an environment where top leaders, officials, and other regional elites have extensive points of contact.[7] The exchanges and socialisation taking place in these meetings create an extensive web of personal networks among the participants, which not only leads to increased confidence and trust among their members but has also contributed to the building of a nascent regional identity. A similar pattern can be seen in the broader East Asian and Asia-Pacific regions, though here the building of a shared identity is less clear. It is necessary to note that the importance of building personal networks goes beyond the top leadership. Also, the informal socialisation among lower level bureaucrats which, too, is evident in ASEAN-related meetings is important, as it builds mutual understanding, confidence, and trust at all bureaucratic levels across policy sectors.

Networks can be of direct importance at a time of conflict, a concrete example being the role of the informal South China Sea Workshops (SCSWs) in the South China Sea during the early 1990s. At the time, the South China Sea was the region's most critical flashpoint while at the same time there was no forum through which this conflict could be efficiently handled. Here the emphasis was put on getting senior officials, usually senior foreign ministry-level officials at department head level, thereby ensuring a direct link back to the decision-makers and other relevant authorities in their home country. The workshops and their working groups have been instrumental in building relationships and trust among officials. They were, in this respect, also crucial for the development of personal networks among participants. The importance of the SCSWs for the network building process should be viewed here in light of the limited integration between China and ASEAN at the time.

Personal networks are also contributing to longer-term peace and prosperity, being a catalyst for positive relations. The membership and socialisation in personal networks can, over time, influence individual and collective identities, norms, and values. In the interviews conducted, it has been made clear that over time, in many cases, not only has trust and confidence been built but there has also been an influence on the social identity of the members. For example, over time, there have been changes in how "the other" is perceived and understood. In more concrete terms, the understanding and trust created through elite networks can prove instrumental in resolving tensions and problems, and in building positive relations.

Policy Challenges: Democracy, Values and Capacities, edited by Georgios Papanagnou, 206. France: UNESCO, 2011.

[7] See ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute. "Events." Accessed June 24, 2020. www.iseas.edu.sg/events/all-events/

Conclusion and Recommendations

Elite networks do contribute to peace and prosperity in the East Asian region. While not being a panacea for political and economic problems, considering the security situation in the region, it is worthwhile to promote and encourage different processes and interactions that create, deepen, and promote the building of networks among and between elite groups in the region. It is as vital today as it has been at any other time, given the shifting power from the United States to China.

It is vital to ensure both formal and informal relations among ASEAN members and with the broader Asia-Pacific region, with new challenges such as the Sino-US trade war and the ongoing pandemic. The whole power structure in the Asia Pacific and the world are trembling, and only time will tell what the situation will be like in the future. To uphold and promote elite interactions and networks are vital, as they can often work as "normal" even during uncertain times. They will help continue ASEAN's integration and success with achieving its aim and purpose. It will also help to ensure ASEAN speaks with one voice, which is vital as the members of ASEAN are stronger together than as separate states.

Elite networks could be seen as particularly relevant today with the current trade war between China and the United States, and China's increased influence in the region and the world. There is a general question mark about what role the United States will play in the future globally as well as in the region.[8] The latter is due to both Washington's unclear international strategy and as a consequence of the ongoing power shift from the West to the East. It is questionable if it has ever been as important for ASEAN members to stay united. As part of this power shift, there are also tensions in the region while managing a regional power shift from Japan and the United States towards China, as well as how to understand and manage China's role as a rising great power and its leadership ambitions. In this unclear and unstable situation, it is essential to ensure the existence and utilisation of informal interpersonal relations. It is clear that now more than ever, there is a need for networks and links across borders beyond formal channels and traditional diplomacy. Exactly how important these networks are and will be is impossible to say, but the risk of not having these links, if there is even the slightest chance they can contribute to peace and prosperity, is a risk too high. ASEAN is stronger united than divided, and elite networks are one component in making ASEAN speak a shared voice.

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[8] See Nordin, A., and Mikael Weissmann. "Will Trump make China great again? The belt and road initiative and international order." *International Affairs* 94 (2018): 231–49. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix242 for a discussion.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this report, a number of policy recommendations follow:

(i)   Different forms of elite-level exchanges, including track 2 and track 1.5 frameworks, should be encouraged. This is the case, even if no direct or short-term impact can be identified. This is particularly important as the COVID-19 situation has hindered meetings and it is essential to restart these exchanges as soon as possible.

(ii)   Try to use elite networks as a tool to facilitate the creation of a shared ASEAN voice.

(iii) It is essential to acknowledge that functional cooperation is of importance beyond their direct impact, such cooperation being a facilitator for network creation.

(iv)   Policymakers should be open to and utilise the insights and networks of members from all sectors.

(v)   Acknowledge and utilise the special position of diffrent think-tanks and related networks to construct narrative pathways and agendas for different organisations.

(vi)   The importance of engaging and including the business community should not be underestimated. The economic sphere often creates links across borders that are not possible to develop in other sectors.

(vii) Make sure to engage with and invite extra-regional participants to regional meetings.

About the Author

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