

**Panel:** ASEAN at the Crossroads

**Date/Time:** Wednesday, April 23, 2014 / 10:30-11:45

**Speakers:** Jonathan T. Chow (Moderator), University of Macau  
Han Feng, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences  
Mark Manyin, Congressional Research Service  
Nguyen Hung Son, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam  
Steve Wong, Institute of Strategic and International Studies, Malaysia

**Rapporteur:** Joe Litt, Yonsei University

Starting as a grouping of countries united against communism in Southeast Asia, ASEAN has evolved over the years and now stands at a crossroad: how will greater regional integration, the return of geopolitics, and China’s growing role in Southeast Asia shape the organization in the coming years? Dr. Mark Manyin focused on 4 key points affecting ASEAN’s future: the demographics of the ASEAN member states, the leadership of the organization, the role of the great powers, and the structure of ASEAN. Dr. Manyin pointed out that the ASEAN members states enjoy low dependency ratios and could reap the benefits of a demographic “sweet spot” with a large percentage of prime-age adults. However, Dr. Manyin cautioned that without the proper investment to absorb this labor force, ASEAN could end up in economic doldrums similar to those Latin American countries that failed to take advantage of these trends.

Regarding leadership, the issues facing ASEAN are: which states will step up to provide leadership and the return of geopolitics to the region. He noted that ASEAN has enjoyed great success in making itself relevant in the last decade, which is evident from the “importance the great powers have placed on ASEAN centrality.” In this regard, he likened ASEAN’s role in global politics to a “cooling role” that moderates great powers much like “a saucer cools the tea.” Finally, he focused on ASEAN’s structure, noting that the organization’s “norms have served it quite well since it was founded,” with particular regard to intra-ASEAN disputes, though the inability to present a common stance on some issues and the capacities of some member states remains in question.

Dr. Nguyen Hung Son focused on ASEAN’s reaction to the return of great power politics and how it could be both a blessing and a curse. Though noting that ASEAN has made great strides in the last 20 years due to the fact that it “had been freed from great power politics,” ASEAN will have to face a new economic reality in which its “role as a driving force in the region is going to be challenged.” Dr. Nguyen recommended that ASEAN stay united and try to have a common voice on regional issues. In particular, he noted that ASEAN can help manage the global power shift by providing transparency in dealing with states outside the region, monitor the major powers in the region, and provide early warning when the major powers disengage from the norms in the regions. He likened ASEAN’s future role to that of a “mediator and honest broker that can help transparentize the rules of the game.”

---

\* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

Discussing the nature of ASEAN itself and whether or not the group is pretending to be something it is not, Mr. Steven Wong said that “a hippopotamus is not a horse, and although a hippopotamus dreams of being a horse, it is not a horse.” He was concerned that ASEAN “may have overreached itself by promising to become a community.” He warns against thinking about ASEAN in “maximalist terms” and continuing to measure the organization in terms of a “yardstick of perfection.” According to Mr. Wong, the central challenge facing ASEAN is whether or not ASEAN can remain united.

Professor Han Feng believes that Sino-ASEAN relations are heading toward greater “cooperation and mechanism building, whether soft or hard.” However, he said that the ASEAN Secretariat is not powerful enough to coordinate members’ actions for implementation of policy, calling the organization “invisible ASEAN.” Instead of dealing with issues on an organizational level, often agreements have to be reached on a bilateral level.